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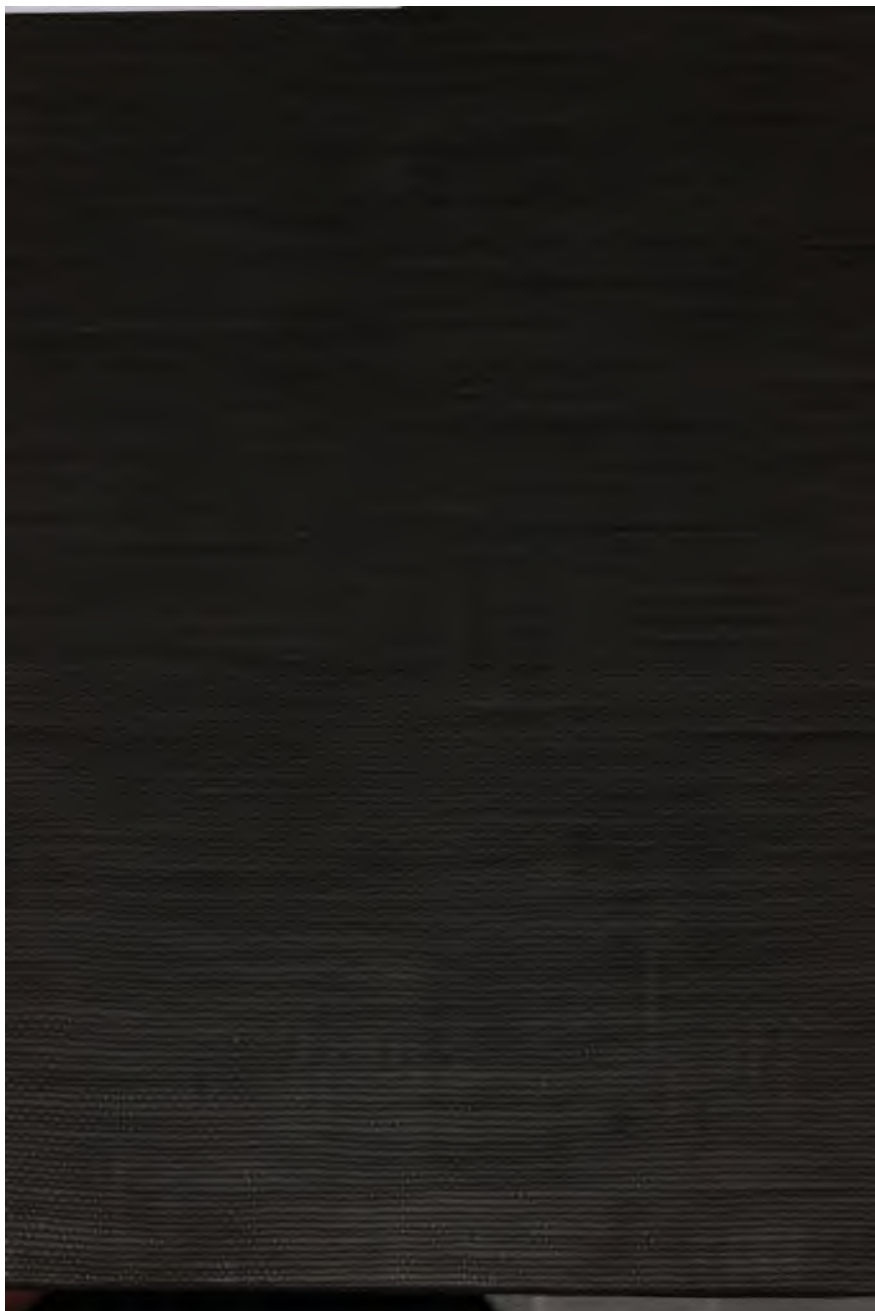
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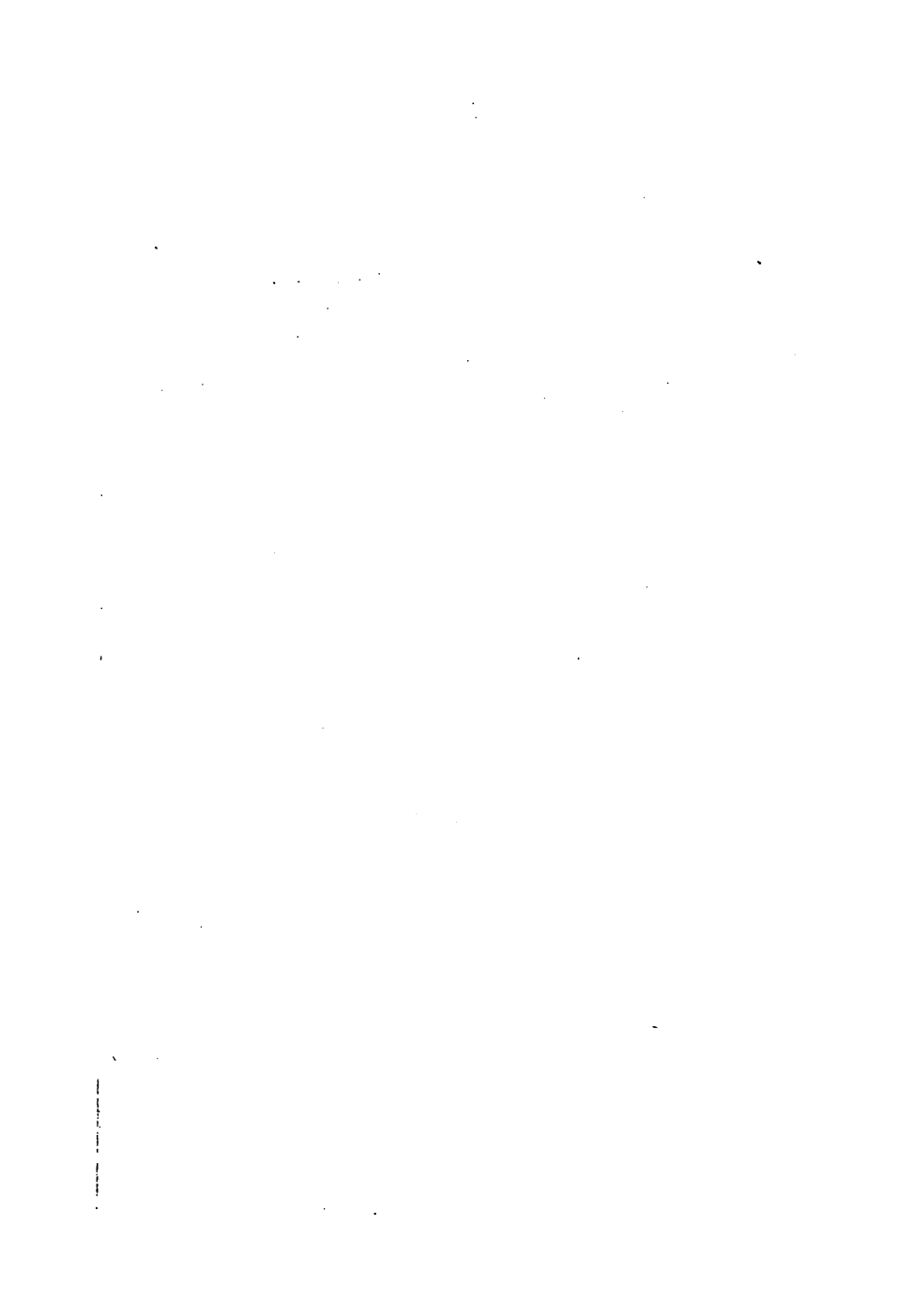
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HEARTS STEADFAST

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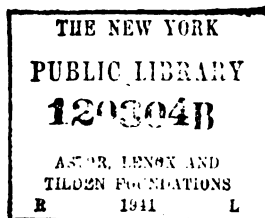
EDWARD S. MOFFAT

Author of "The Desert and Mrs. Ajax," "The Misadventures
of Cassidy," "The Highgrader," and other stories.

NEW YORK
MOFFAT, YARD & COMPANY

1915

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PART ONE
THE EAST

HEARTS STEADFAST

CHAPTER I

IT was yet a little while to dawn when Alva woke. For a time she lay among her tumbled coverings, luxuriously inert, lazily trying to piece the night's phantasms together and doze back into a repetition of her dreams. But the sun was soon streaming in beside her bed, blocking out the cool, green matting on her floor with bars of yellow light and, as the call of the waves along the shore came stronger, her body grew restive with life. Pushing herself upright on a boyishly muscled arm, with the dark rope of her hair tumbling across her breast, the girl sat looking out of her window at the golden crescent of the beach and the still, lavender waters of the Sound.

Everywhere blessed sunlight gleamed back at her—from yellow shingle with its myriad, glinting pebbles—from pillared cottage and dazzling window pane—from her canoe, up-

turned on the grass—from a wheeling gull and a snowy sail far down the shore. And against the pierhead at the end of the walk the forever lapping waves were whispering, whispering. Like herself, the world was silent, but it was awake.

Impetuously she tossed off her coverings and slipped into the bathing suit laid out on the chair beside her bed. A moment spent inspecting a rounded knee she had bruised on the court the day before and another in which to knot her rubber cap tighter about her head and she was ready. She was young, she was strong, she was exuberantly well—the song of the sea was humming in her veins—wherefore she would steal forth into this silent, sunlit world and have her glorious swim. At the head of the stairs she hesitated for sounds from her father's room which would say that he, too, was awake; but, hearing nothing, padded softly down with silken feet and sped away towards the pier, thrilled with the dewy freshness of the grass. Looking back at the shuttered cottages and the bulk of the hotel she was glad to see only a gardener with his hose, pottering about a lawn. For in this wonderful, secret hour the girl wanted nothing so much as com-

plete freedom from restraint—to double the delicious tremors of the plunge by being quite alone—to practice her “jack-knife” and “back-dive” and “trudgeon” to her heart’s content, untroubled by critical male eyes.

From all of which it may be truthfully surmised that Miss Alva Leigh was pretty nearly just what she seemed, outwardly, to be—a perfectly normal, well cared-for young person of twenty-two, with no worldly troubles whatever, a very definite love of sport and a correspondingly strong dislike for strenuous mental effort or futile self-analysis at any time. In fact, Miss Alva Leigh preferred to analyze life just as infrequently as possible, for it very fortunately happened that her days were too thronged with the joys of living to miss one jot of it by mulling over anything which had gone before. Just now, with her senses pleasantly clouded with sleep, her mind seemed hardly to be a place of thoughts at all but, rather, an amusing collection of fleeting impressions—a sense of springy turf beneath her feet, of sweet odors from vine and flower-bed, of a grateful sun that tingled on her neck, of swift, exultant limbs that bore her seaward. As a matter of fact, only one thought occurred to her with any

marked distinctness in this pleasantly pagan state and this one came just as she stood poised on the pierhead, a momentary prey to the delightful qualms which always preceded the plunge. Flitting into her mind from some irresponsible source, its extravagance made her laugh out loud as she swung her arms above her head.

"This must be the way a person feels just after a person has been married," thought Alva. And then, with a perfect, arching dive, was in.

The day was never properly begun for this strenuously athletic young person unless she touched bottom in her plunge. But this morning a good twenty feet of clear, green water lay above the sand and she saw, as quickly as she opened her eyes, that she would have to fight to win. As she drove downwards with even, powerful strokes she wished she had taken a deeper breath.

At fifteen feet, as might have been expected, Alva began to feel distressed. A yard or so deeper and she seemed to have got into the clutch of a giant hand, with his iron fingers digging in her ears. Her strokes slackened for a moment as the pain mounted in her chest.

She saw the far-off, murky bottom first stand still and then recede. And then, while every physical call was for air and relief from this intolerable pain, from somewhere came a determination to conquer in what she had set out to do—a curious, steadily hardening anger which seemed to make a personal enemy of the invisible foe and only grow the stronger and blinder the more it was opposed. Putting out the last ounce of her strength, the girl drove herself down again with staring eyes and clawing hands. She would strike out until she could do no more—the rest would have to take care of itself. Unnecessary? Yes—admittedly—but in natures essentially simple both faults and virtues are very simply expressed, and it so happened this morning that the girl named Alva Leigh was helplessly obeying her nature's principal requirement down there beneath the mist-hung waters of the Sound.

At last she touched and, with the fierce joy of victory flaming in her breast, shot like an otter to the surface. The light streamed through and sounds roared in her ears—she was almost in the air again. Then, suddenly, her head thudded violently against a strange body which was neither very hard nor very

soft but which interposed a frightening barrier between herself and the precious air. There was a moment of awful panic and a desperate effort to swim around it, a confused altercation with some legs which kicked at her, then she burst through into the sunlight directly in front of a crisp, blonde head, two astonished blue eyes and a masculine mouthful of good, white teeth.

"HoH!" laughed the mouth, and spluttered out an amazing quantity of salt water.

"HoH!" responded Alva correctly, and choked.

The blonde unknown thrust out a helping hand.

"I say! I hope I didn't hurt you," he panted. "I didn't mean to get in your way, you know. Never knew you were there. Not crippled? You're sure?"

"Not a bit," smiled Alva, though her heart still thudded. "Much obliged for the lift. You can let go now." And, turning over on her back, she half swam, half floated back to the pier.

Yellow Head followed at a discreet distance, masking very perceptible interest with concern.

"I say! Wasn't that beastly stupid of me?" he called. "I do wish I were sure you're not hurt."

"Oh, no. It was quite all my own fault," Alva assured him as she climbed up. Then, feeling a little done up, she sat down on the pier bench and helplessly watched him approach—such a very big young man that she feared he would never stop coming up the ladder.

A pair of long and capably muscled arms—a small and well shaped head of the familiar New England type, with faintly prominent cheek-bones, clean cut jaw and ears close set—legs not too straight nor calves too thick—a barrel of a chest. As he straightened up she saw that his big back muscles made him v-shaped from the waist up and knew that here, at last, was some one who could paddle a canoe. He might have been termed good-looking too, but after all his best feature was his wide, good natured mouth, which promptly broke into a cheerful grin. Yellow Head stuck out an impulsive hand.

"Awfully sorry all over again," this pleasantly informal person said, with an infectious laugh. "I was down there scouting around

for a pin I lost there yesterday. Must have been down two minutes or more—that's why I didn't see you. Ought to have known better than to trust that pin to a flimsy old suit like mine," he gloomed.

"Fraternity?" Alva hazarded.

"Yes," he nodded. "Beta Chi. Columbia. Oh, yes. I forgot. My name's Jaffray. I'm down here with Bunk Higgins. You know Bunk and Natalie, of course? Bunk thinks he can play the royal game of tennis and I came down yesterday to show him the error of his ways. *You* play, I know—I've heard all about it. I'll bet you play a slashing game. Will you play with *me*? We'll sweep the courts if you do," he assured her with fetching confidence. "Oh—say! Is that your canoe? Fine! Fine! Just give me a paddle, *please*, and watch me skim you across the Sound!"

There didn't seem to be any perceptible break in Yellow Head's enthusiasms and his tongue was delightfully free. Alva felt both attracted and amused.

"Play golf, of course? What's your best drive? A hundred and eighty—*ninety*? Bully! Oh, yes," he admitted at her question. "I'm a little bit at it, myself, but no great

shakes. It hasn't got the punch. Baseball, football and track—those are my games—and tennis.”

His roving eye seized on the garage behind the house as they neared the land end of the pier. “Car, too!” he chortled. “Bet you drive it yourself. Alas! No hideous luxury like that in mine. I’ve got to find my gold mine first. Let’s walk and save the gasoline. Now, *don’t* forget about that tennis, will you?” he insisted with delicious self-confidence. “Half-past ten might prove the significant hour. You and I against Bunk and Natalie—or that good sport Sally Lowe-girl, what? You lure them on to their fate over the ’phone and I’ll come shyly along with reluctant feet. *Good!*” he said firmly, before she could either accede or decline. “That’s the stuff! Mum’s the word. We’ll make ’em howl. Good-by.”

He left her, this irrepressible young giant, with a painfully fervent grip of his big hand and another of his engaging grins and struck out on a run for the Higgins cottage down the beach. For a hundred yards or more he jogged along over the tarred pavement and then charged over impetuously onto the soft lawn where he stretched his long legs in an

amazing burst of speed. Just when Alva had firmly decided to watch this attractive person no longer he brought up at the Higgins steps, looked back, laughed and, very disconcertingly, waved his hand.

The girl colored faintly, just a little doubtful as to the good taste of the salute. The discreet youths who came down to Madison each year from the colleges all beautifully turned out from the same correct mold would have been most careful of that. And yet something told her that here was a good deal more than the usual mild appeal of collegiate enthusiasms—something refreshingly untamed, a little more creative than discretion. And so, because she and the unknown had probably broken all known records for making acquaintance and because, in the second place, she couldn't help it, she waved a faint return.

An hour later Alva came down to breakfast. Still glowing from her vigorous rub, fresh, starry-eyed and all in white down to her red soled tennis shoes she was the very picture of physical efficiency, a modern Atalanta ready for a happy day. Yet, as she passed through the big living-room which fronted, one way, on the vivid green of the lawns and, the other way,

on the sparkling miles of the Sound she ran a housekeeper's eye over floor and furniture, for Alva had been motherless even before she went to Farmington to school and the girl was mistress in her father's house.

But the maids had done their work and there was little of which she might complain—she could only give a re-arranging touch to a book or a table cover here and there. And so she presently paused and gave up a moment to quiet enjoyment of the pretty room with its gay coverings of flowered chintz, its cool grass rugs and summery wicker furniture.

There was not a great deal in the room, although one knew there might have been. The confidence with which the big red bowl sat boldly alone on top of the black walnut bookcase, the unadorned grace of the two, slim, silver vases on the mantel-shelf, the conceded unmodernity of the half dozen hunting prints on the walls, were simply assurances of the ability to do much more, if it were thought worth while. Even the easy chair in which the girl loved to see her father sit at night with the light from his reading lamp making a cameo of his delicate profile was not obtrusively an article of luxury. That, too, had its air of con-

tented freedom from *nouveau riche* requirements. If the Leigh easy chair had been mortal it would probably have been a duke, unembarrassed in old clothes.

It must be conceded here that it had never before occurred to Alva to value the material surroundings of her father's life and hers. Doubtless this was because they were so wholly satisfying. There was always plenty of money—she bought practically whatever she wanted—like so many other things which made up her happy, rather thoughtless existence she accepted all these comforts without concern either as to their source or their significance. Some people, of course, would have termed this selfishness but the fact of the matter merely was that, so far, there had been no occasion for any deep, dark investigation into life. When everything is given you and life is pleasant, why investigate? In the same way, Alva was never at much pains to arrange her social affairs—they seemed, somehow, always to adjust themselves. Social chasms, when they occasionally interposed between herself and casual acquaintances, were detected more often by instinct than by thoughtful analysis. She was, in fact, simply a girl of splendidly

quick appreciations—not morbidly thin skinned but only of that fine nature which feels distinctions intuitively—as if all the senses drank them in instead of only two—and she lived her life gracefully and easily by a sort of preordained knack of doing only the right thing.

But this morning there seemed to be something in existence which called for very definite valuing and with it came the consciousness that the power had suddenly been given her. It was as if she was a school girl once more, surprised to see an obstinate geometrical proposition yielding up its proof—or as if her opinions had been chemicals mixed but motionless in a bowl and a shock had crystallized them. Once more she looked around the room and for the first time it came over her fully that she, Alva Leigh, was an exceptionally fortunate young woman. In all that made up her life today, the love of her father, her circle of friends, her worldly possessions, whether they were part of the summer home here at Madison or the big Park Avenue house in town there was not one that was not utterly satisfactory—nothing but the loveliest and best.

A great love for life welled up in the girl's heart. She felt a sudden longing to fulfill her

duty to all of this which had so evidently been given her for some certain purpose—a consciousness, too, of unusual strength of body and will which must be properly applied or she would waste the splendid gifts of which she had just now become inordinately proud. But the means discernible on this strangely happy summer morning were still all too vague. In spite of the urge which radiant health and new appreciations were giving her, Alva, not unnaturally, could not see much beyond the customary activities of a girl in her position—a right marriage, children, good friends, a properly balanced interest in those who were unfortunate. And so, after a little while the moment's curious exaltation passed away and Alva was only a vigorous young pagan again, with a recollecting smile for the bubbling young giant of the pier and a very frank desire for something to eat.

Within the breakfast-room the percolator plumped contentedly and sent up little wisps of steam. Alva set the toaster going, dropping the doors from time to time and turning the golden slices over with the tip of a pink finger. Then she looked up and smiled happily again. Sunlight in floods, the aroma of bacon from be-

hind pantry doors, damask, silver, the packet of letters and the crisply folded newspaper beside her father's plate, the flat green glass dish in the center of the table, where four old-rose hollyhocks lay as if dropped lightly in a pool—everything was as it should be on this glorious morning. And outside on the freshly hosed veranda two agitated, curly, black retrievers whined for a pat and clawed reproachfully at the screen door.

A step on the stairs and in the living-room—a deferential little pause at the door where he bowed “good-morning” with a twinkle in his eye—and Rutherford Leigh sat down at his place and addressed himself to his grape-fruit. He was a rather slender, daintily dressed gentleman, with a waxen skin, delicate features, white, pointed beard and noticeably small hands and feet—who always wore a *boutonniere* and always seemed quite cool and self-possessed. It cannot be said that he gave the impression of very great strength either physical or mental, but when one remembered that he had been left a fortune when he was a young man there seemed little necessity for him to be much more than a graceful, pleasantly scholarly personality who might better

be appealed to in matters of artistic taste than business. To confirm this idea there was the testimony that Rutherford Leigh had been a good deal of a traveler in his early days and had contributed several papers of more or less moment to the Royal Geographical Society, although nowadays his activities were confined to the leisurely collecting of rare prints which he afterwards bound into his books. He had married Incarnacion De la Fuente, the daughter of an old Spanish family which had come to the United States shortly after the Civil War and had engaged profitably in exporting. The marriage, however, had not been carried out without considerable opposition from the De la Fuente brothers. People didn't know just what the objection had been but Tomas and Antonio and Domingo De la Fuente had been a unit in opposing it and had not been good friends with Alva's mother subsequently. Of the three brothers only Antonio now remained, an exquisitely polite, little brown wisp of a man with offices in a high building down at Bowling Green, whence he could see his argosies set sail, but Alva saw her Uncle 'Tonio only infrequently although she knew he liked her and she liked him.

And so, when people knew of the Puritan father and the Castilian mother, it was not difficult to see that Alva Leigh, while not necessarily a person of contradictions, might easily have two sides to her nature. She would undoubtedly be quick to anger, like her Spanish forebears, and yet where they would finally have loosed their hold the colder Pilgrim blood would quietly, but just as passionately, keep on striving, fighting, most of all, pursuing. In the girl's big dark eyes the fires of passionate romance smoldered and yet, so far, the fires had been controlled by nerves as cool as ice. Just now the two natures were in balance but some day, perhaps, would come a sudden assault and then, in the struggle for survival, one of the two would be forever lost.

"Great water this morning, Dad! Touched bottom at twenty feet!"

"And no one helped?" her father asked quizzically, as he folded his paper over to the stock reports.

"Oh, yes. A rather nice strange young man helped—by nearly drowning me."

"Strange?" asked her father, who owned a rare sense for foreign elements.

"'Yes' and 'No.' He's Bunk's engineer

friend from Columbia. They've been talking about him for weeks. Natalie's sure we'll be crazy about him. But he hasn't a penny, I know. Just for that I expect to play tennis with him, violently, at half-past ten."

Rutherford Leigh nodded abstractedly. Having been assured in this rather fragmentary fashion that the somebody in question was the friend of somebody else and therefore properly accounted for, he set his eye on the stock quotations. Meanwhile his hand went out towards his coffee cup.

It was a fine, dry, scholarly hand, this hand of Rutherford Leigh's, and well kept, too—an almost feminine hand, in fact, which fortunately or unfortunately had never done much in life except turn over, rather superciliously, records of what other men had created out of their blood and tears and sweat. This thought, however, had never been brought home to Rutherford Leigh and up to date he was well satisfied with life. Presently his delicate hand, in its leisurely wanderings, would reach his delicate cup and he would feel his coffee, comforting and aromatic, against his lips, while he mused on the course of the market

and let the consciousness of his perspicacity steal over him with the warmth of his drink.

But, for some unknown reason, the hand did not immediately reach his cup this morning. Instead, it stopped in mid-air, quivered and then dropped, clenched, on the table. Still, it made no noise and, for all his daughter saw, Rutherford Leigh was only centering his mind acutely on something that he read.

Finding her father presently too preoccupied to make more than monosyllabic replies to her remarks, Alva excused herself as soon as she had finished and turned to the duties of the day. Principally, these consisted in going to market in her car, partly for the ride itself and partly because of the firm conviction that green-grocers, among rich cottagers, were but human. This, too, was the hour in which her father read his mail in a cool corner of the porch and where they generally met to exchange plans for the day, so when she had run her car back into the garage a little later she was surprised not to find him in his accustomed place. Instead, he was sitting inert in a chair on the Sound side of the house, in the full glare of the sun. His newspaper was lying on the

floor in a heap and only one of his letters had been opened. As she drew near he folded it shut and slipped it into his pocket.

"About that car of mine, Dad," his daughter said. "I've been sizing it up going over the bumps and I'm afraid it isn't going to stand another year's racket. If I'm going to exchange it I think I'd better do it right away. The gasoline man over in the village tells me I can get five hundred dollars on it in a swap and by adding a thousand—"

Something in her father's manner made the girl hesitate. For once in his life he seemed curiously remote and troubled.

"That would be a very fair bargain, I should say," he answered in considerate but rather lifeless tones. "But are you quite sure that you really need a new car? Not being a mechanic or a motoring enthusiast I can only ask that kind of a question."

Alva read his mind.

"It's too much money," she said, with quick resentment for her sudden demand. "I won't spend it. Forgive me for ever speaking of it, Dad. I guess I must be selfish."

"No. You're not at all selfish," her father contradicted gently. "But, since you've put it

in the light of unnecessary expense perhaps we'd better let it stay there—for a time. I don't mind telling you that owing to some—er—investments I have lately made—certain business engagements I have entered into—obligations which no really honorable man would shirk—”

Alva laid a soft finger on his lips.

“Not a word, Dad dear. You'll hear no more from me for months. And now I'm going to get ready for a little tennis with the new playmate. Better come watch me win!”

Rutherford Leigh smiled faintly but shook his head. He kept the smile until the sound of the screen door told him that his daughter was surely inside. Then something wiped the smile away. His hand sought his pocket. He took his letter out and opened it, slumping down in his chair. Before he had opened his letter the first time Rutherford Leigh had been a very prosperous looking man—a rather good looking man, too,—not very old and certainly in good physical preservation. But something he had learned during the past hour had changed all that and now, as he sat shrunk in his chair, he was like a man whose physician has definitely fixed the number of his days.

He stared at his letter and then stared unsee-
ingly over its top across the featureless reaches
of the Sound. It was not a long letter but
what it said was very much to the point, for it
had been written by the senior member of the
firm of Hicks & Wicks of Wall Street.

Now, one may buy stocks and salt them down
and one may buy bonds for investment. Also,
if one has unlimited means, one may not un-
righteously take a little flyer for amusement's
sake, but when an elderly recluse, who for years
has been secretly living up his capital, attempts
the marginal buying of a staple only one result
may reasonably be expected, even though he
deal through specialists. And Hicks & Wicks
were "specialists"—in "Sugar."

CHAPTER II

“**S**CORE is—forty-love!” droned the official scorer, perched precariously on top of his stepladder, and sighed with relief over the imminent end of the finals in the Mixed Doubles Cup. “Games are—five-one! Miss Leigh and Mr. Jaffray leading.”

The new playmate flashed a look of encouragement at Alva, cool and determined on the back line—grinned triumphantly as her serve skimmed the net like a bullet—then pounded a feeble return down the side line where recovery was hopeless. After which victors and vanquished shook hands effusively at the net and Alva and Donald, flushed and smiling, hastily sought places among the Warrens and Lowes and Higginses decorating the grass, there to be genially assaulted by shrieks of:

“Mughunters!”


“Oh, you Americans commercialize everything!”

"We don't see how you have the nerve to take it!"

But Alva only laughed, with shining eyes, and settled down to cool out in her big, white coat, content to sit silent but amused in partner-like proximity while her yellow headed champion ably defended their joint attachment of nearly every golf and tennis trophy since the season opened.

To the philosophical observer, the bare-headed two in flannels with their new cup between them on the grass, made only another of those diverting pairs for whose particular benefit our summer worlds seem to have been created—a muscular, brown-armed boy and girl, blissfully content in each other's company and fantastically irresponsible. For whom houses exist merely to rest in for a few begrudged hours, servants to gather up hastily changed garments, cooks to feed the fires of energy and parents to pay bills—not always in love with one another, it's true, but always irrepressibly, amazingly, gloriously in love with life.

Now, in the pages of truly popular romance the young woman of this pair would be gifted with many and strange talents. Chief among



these would be a rather appalling determination to marry the man she wanted. Our light hearted novelist would have small concern with the lady's ruthlessness to friend or foe in her pursuit if he could only invest her in enough sharp practice to entertain those who are entertained by that sort of thing. While if she happened to be so priceless a character as an heiress she would be promptly written down as a kind of super-woman, overcoming all resistances by her cheek and her checkbook. Predatory females would be summarily driven off and parents sturdily overborne by this delightful creature, opportunity for the proposal would be boldly provided, the helpless male firmly secured. Or, at least, so it would read.

But Alva Leigh, being steadfast rather than aggressive and essentially athletic instead of sentimental, couldn't seem to do any of these things. She could only enjoy to the utmost every minute that she spent with Donald and, when something kept him away, wonder dumbly what she could do with herself until they would be together again. Not such a strange situation for one who has passed through it but quite strange enough for any one the first time and, in Alva's case, full of

anguish. For Alva Leigh, in her whole-hearted acceptance of the new playmate, had thought for several weeks that she was only following love of fun—until fun unmasked and showed itself as love of Donald. When she realized this, and she did not acknowledge it hastily, came a second conviction in which there was no happiness at all—nothing, in fact, but old fashioned despair. She thought she saw that Donald, unlike herself, was still entirely in the thrall of Sport—that he would never realize that she, who had so suddenly learned the meaning of their companionship, was standing, waiting.

And so the last week of the boy's stay at Madison, with the interested Higgins family and the Warrens and the Lowes and many other people unknown to the girl looking on, became a rather tragic period for Alva. In that week everything seemed to go wrong. It was not given her to understand her father's business affairs but she realized now that all had not been well with him for some time past. Rutherford Leigh seemed worried, even shaken. He had lost his erect carriage and the look of placidity he had worn all through the years. He was abstracted. He forgot his

flower. Sometimes he was brusque. Often he sat for hours slumped down in his chair on the porch, staring out over the Sound with his book closed on his knee. Or else he spent his days in town, coming back on a late evening train, haggard and harassed. Several times the girl found opportunity to bring her father and Donald together but Rutherford Leigh had proved so disappointingly uninterested in the young man that Alva had given up the attempt with a puzzled feeling of hurt.

But this was not all that had disturbed the girl for, under the stress of feeling, she had begun to study Donald and to worry over one glaring fault. It had nothing to do, as it happened, with his plans for the future for, vague as they seemed to be, he must work these out for himself, nor had it to do with the gift he would not accept or else was too blind to see. Perhaps it was only a tendency at the worst and one that jealousy might be exaggerating but the fact remained that Mr. Donald Jaffray was very definitely lacking in an important kind of discrimination.

Even at the most conservative resort the idle months of summer are the gay outlaws of the social year and it seemed to Alva as if that

last week filled Madison with every sort of girl she did not like. It seemed, too, as if every merry-eyed irresponsible who secured partners all too quickly at the hotel dances or created a sensation on the beach contrived to interest Donald. In fact, he appeared to gravitate helplessly towards such women, as if there were some hereditary germ of social outlawry in his blood. And yet, oddly enough, when the boy came back to her each time he seemed to steady down immediately in his appreciation of the better kind of friends. In the past two days the two had got back on their solid basis of companionship again and Alva grew happier in the belief that it was only his superabundant spirits that needed control.

But their last evening together found the boy wordless and the girl distraught and sad. They knew they had had thirty golden days together out of a summer made wonderful by every diversion that genius could invent and now that it was over they were wondering if this was all that such things meant. Their hearts were choked with the poignant queries of Youth and yet they were afraid to ask. They could only see that they had grown in-

dispensable one to the other and now bleak parting loomed up ahead.

Until a day or so before Alva had secretly cherished the hope that her father might help her keep Donald home in the East. While, of course, the boy must never know, it seemed so easy to arrange with some old business friend for a position to be offered him—such things had been done for many a man she knew. So far as Alva could see, a mining engineer could just as profitably mine chalk as gold if a position were made for him. But, after her first discouraging attempt to enlist her father's help the girl's better judgment came to her rescue. The fact was, Donald was not yet ready to be helped. There was too much that he must first work off, too many vague theories, inconsequent ideas, slack habits, too much of the young Adam. It would take time and perhaps a little adversity to burn them away but in the end he would be a bigger, cleaner man for it.

For a while they tried to dance in the half empty ballroom of the hotel but found it curiously unamusing. Thoughts of the morning weighed too heavily on them—too much was

yet unsaid. And so, exchanging unspoken consent, they left the lights and the blaring music and wandered in melancholy fashion down towards the pier. There a moonless night wrapped them round with its velvet pall. Except for a vague shape stretching landwards to the line of yellow lights along the drive they might have been miles out at sea. A bench was there and they sat down. After a time Donald spoke.

"Do you know," he said, "you've been awfully good to me—you and your father and your friends. I've had the one wonderful time of my life this summer and I think you know already how profoundly grateful I feel. It makes me wonder sometimes if you'd be interested in knowing the kind of work I'll have to do after I leave here—and where I'll be."

"I'd like to know," the girl responded. That was all she could say. It was as she had feared. He would never see.

"I have to make some money—quick," the boy went on soberly. "I haven't any now, as I guess you know. All I own is my brain and my hands. So I've come to the conclusion that my best game is to get into metal mining somewhere in the West. That's what I've

been messing around with at college and although I just squeaked through I've learned enough to make me see the big chances there are in it. Of course, I could stick around here in the East and get into coal mining or something like that but, from what I can see, there wouldn't be any money in it for years and years. Salaries are too low. There are too many anxious young engineers.

"On the other hand, if I go west, there's always the chance that I'll strike it rich. Out there, I guess, there's a temptation to settle down in the rut just as there is here and that's what I've got to fight. If I get into a big, established camp like Butte or Bingham or Cripple Creek it will probably mean much the same kind of a beastly grind as if I were stuck off in a coal town somewhere in the Pennsylvania hills. But—the little camps! The new camps. The *desert*! The places where fellows haven't been! That's where the big chances are! Why—I might be able to find something inside of six months that would put me on my feet *forever*! I haven't a doubt that I can make just as good pay in a new camp as in one ten years old—and think of the chances I'd have! Don't you agree with me?"

"I don't know," the girl answered, miserably. She wrapped her scarf around her throat and stared out over the dark water. All men were alike, it seemed. They thought of nothing but their work—just as if work were the chief end of existence. *Life!* Why were they always forgetting that? Did they think there was no art or honor in simply *living*? Wasn't there just as much credit in bringing another person happiness as in fighting the world for years, making her wait and suffer while you were getting rid of some wrong-headed idea that wouldn't have harmed you if you'd stayed at home? There were always people willing to do the rough work on the outposts of the world—who seemed to choose the line of greatest resistance out of sheer perversity. Let these people solve the problems, if they must be solved. Let Donald stay here. The problems would not be fewer. They would only be lesser in degree.

Poor Alva! Struggling with the question that woman can never answer. Rebelling against the resistless urge of the creative in man—the call of the forest uncut, the stream unforded, the shaft undug, the trail unbroken—the lure of the Open, the Unknown, the great

god Chance! Millions like her had rebelled and millions were still to lift their plaint. For it was as plain to her as to her uncounted sisters that there were always stark, loveless souls who could easily be the pioneers. And if the tremendous work were not finished to-day, why worry? The world would not immediately pass away. In the meantime at least two people might be happy.

"I don't want you to misunderstand me," the boy continued presently. "I only want you to know this—that I will take any chance—go anywhere—do *anything* to succeed. You may think that I want the life out west for the excitement but I don't. I only see that there's something out there in those hills that I'm going to wrench away. I think the reason why more men don't get what they want in life is because they don't dare enough. If they'd only put everything they owned on one big gamble and push it *through*, they'd win. Perhaps you think I'm reckless but it's recklessness with a purpose. I'm simply going to go and go until I find it or else drop."

Alva raised her head, surprised. This wasn't what she'd thought he had in mind. Until now he'd seemed only a magnificently

lovable, big boy but here was a plan as practical as could be and she knew his bravery would see him through. It was a new light which the last few words had thrown on his purposes. She saw him at last as a grown man and she loved him the more for her surprise. If there had been any doubt as to his ability to cut his way through to success it had been dissipated by his simple statement of the chances which she knew undoubtedly existed, no less than by his determination to keep on till he found what he sought. It was a revelation in one way for Alva but, in another, it made her more miserable than before. The fact that he'd carefully withheld his plans till now was only one more proof that his summer had never been as full of herself as hers had been full of him. She felt again that women knew men little better than men knew women. The world might say that, to a woman, a man's mind was an open book but it seemed to the girl staring out into the darkness that it was more frequently a secret chamber into which he callously withdrew for his own purposes—against whose iron door sweet intrusion could batter her soft hands to no avail. And so Donald's careful elaboration of his plans fell

upon deaf ears. Only two things were perfectly clear to Alva. He didn't love her and—to-morrow he was going away. What else mattered?

She stole a look at him through the darkness for she knew he could not see her brimming eyes. He had dropped into silence and was staring dumbly ahead of him as she had stared. There was no moon and though they sat with shoulders nearly touching she could distinguish only the faint outlines of his figure. Yet she knew well how he looked—the crisp, blond head, the flashing smile, the frank, strong eyes. The softly luminous shirt bosom and white waistcoat of his dress clothes made her see again his big shoulders and small waist—she pictured him from head-top down to silk shod feet and there was nothing she would have added to or taken away. Yet she who had always had everything she wanted till she wanted the one thing that made everything else of no value had to sit there wordless, with happiness only an arm's length away, and feel her heart turning into stone inside her.

Going away! To-morrow he would be gone. She turned away from him on the bench and clenched her hidden hands. Far out on the

dark waters a Sound boat whistled hoarsely. "Oi-Oi-Oi! He's going away—away!" An ice cold mist stole landwards and seemed to chill her soul and body. She shivered, drowned in misery.

And so she was unaware, for a moment, of an arm that crept towards her along the back of the bench. And she had no ears, at first, for a whisper or sense of a hand that groped for hers and found it clenching her dress.

"Alva," said a voice. "I've been trying not to tell you but I can't stand it any longer. I haven't any right to tell you even now for I've nothing to offer except myself but if you ever think of me when I'm gone you'll know I'm working harder and longer because you let me say it just this once."

The girl's heart gave one great throb, then seemed to stop its beating. She sat without moving. What kind of mad dream was this? If she were really conscious then the impossible had begun to happen.

And yet a hand was crushing one of hers—was lifting it steadily, strongly to his lips. An arm was stealing about her shoulders—an arm that would not be denied but drew her, trembling, nearer and nearer,—till she lifted

her head and saw his eyes. And then light and life and the happiness that never was to have been hers flooded into her soul. She broke into a sob in his arms. Their lips met.

CHAPTER III

ABOUT two weeks after Donald Jaffray left Madison for Salt Lake City some white haired and wealthy gentlemen connected with the sugar industry came to the depressing conclusion that business conditions were very, very bad and that they ought to sell some stock.

In fact, they were so completely convinced that people would presently stop eating sugar that they said they were going to keep their conclusions perfectly secret, which naturally resulted in a widespread selling movement. But after sugar had retrograded to the lowest point in years conditions suddenly improved—overnight. The white haired old gentlemen, without a trace of a smile, advised each other that they must have been badly mistaken. Whereupon Sugar executed a right-about-face and went up like a rocket. The Leigh fortune, however, came down like the stick.

There is not a great deal of difference, it

sometimes seems, between the loss of a fortune and a death in the family. Friends and relatives come to condole—a few wonder vaguely if there is anything they can “do” and, being informed in the negative, are vastly relieved—those of a speculative turn of mind spend long hours estimating the effect of the shock on various members of the family—the world, at large, keeps carefully out of the way so as to spare itself.

At first, of course, there was a great deal of sympathy for Rutherford Leigh as well as for the girl who had once had everything. People said he must have been very badly advised and didn't quite see how he had managed to lose it “all.” When they learned, therefore, that the Leigh fortune had been, for years, only a steadily dwindling shell Rutherford Leigh took on his true proportions in their eyes. Men dismissed him with a sniff because he was weak and a fool. The women, being more practical, regarded him with unconcealed abhorrence because he had secretly lived up as well as gambled away his daughter's inheritance.

In this state of things there is small wonder that Alva's Uncle 'Tonio, down in the city, was

not able to do much more than assist in closing up the Leigh affairs. It was very plain to the girl now that Antonio De la Fuente had always regarded her father with suspicion and though he was kind to her he was barely courteous to her father in all that had to be done in clearing up the muss. There ensued, then, a heart breaking time which extended into the late fall. The Park Avenue property was put on the market as quickly as possible and the house at Madison, together with Alva's motor, was sold. The Leigh collections of rare prints and paintings, books, *netsukes* and bric-a-brac were auctioned off at one-fifth their value. Meantime, provision had to be made for life under the changed conditions and so Alva went flat-hunting for a week and finally found a small apartment on the upper West Side where the ridiculous inadequacy of the rooms was partly atoned for by a hall-boy and a prison-cell view of sky and river.

Here she took her father and, for a time, was very well occupied in the multitude of details created by its furnishing. After that many of her friends came back to town and she took up again, though in restricted measure, the life she had lived before the *débâcle*.

Alva's friends wondered how she could take it all so calmly. They didn't know the steadfast strain in the girl that called on her to stand by her father and make the fight silently. Nor did they know about Donald and, for reasons of her own and Donald's, Alva didn't tell them. All they could see was that a witless old recluse had irretrievably ruined their friend's future—unless some eligible young man put in his prompt appearance. And so Natalie Higgins, with the match-making instincts of the engaged girl, spent most of the winter in a labor of love which, greatly to that young person's disappointment, proved quite fruitless. When at last the former schoolmate's patience was totally exhausted Natalie spoke her mind.

"I don't see what makes you so unreasonably contented," she railed. "By all the rules of the game you ought to be wildly *discontented*. You used to have everything and now you've got nothing and it doesn't seem to make one speck of difference. You may or may not be aware that I think you're the grandest lady in the world just because you do feel that very good way, but all the same I can't understand it. Why don't you call on some young Rub-

ber or Coal or Oil or Rapid Transit to solve the problem of your future existence? Remember—I don't insist on your marrying any of the prize packages *I* have produced. Perhaps the last lot *was* too soaked with wealth to be entirely human but all that Jim Warren and I want you to do is to marry some one right away quick."

After that there was no hope for it. The story of Donald had to be told. But it was told with a quiet earnestness in the voice and a glow in the eyes that made the rather calculating Natalie envy such all absorbing and conspicuously unmodern faith. And so Alva was permitted, after a loving hug, to go back to her dreams and her letters and to be industrious socially only so far as the amenities required.

Donald wrote at great length and not without humorous appreciation of his vicissitudes. After a few weeks in Salt Lake City he had made the acquaintance of an ancient prospector named Swank and a capitalist named Switzer and had paid the party's expenses into the Deep Creek region to the west because the "capitalist" was temporarily embarrassed and they must stake out Swank's claims without

loss of time. But old Swank had somehow been unable to find again the gulch in which he had originally made his immensely valuable discovery and Switzer had turned out to be a charter member of the Ananias Club so, after making an equal division of the outfit, at the capitalist's delicate suggestion, the three had parted and Donald had had his first experience at prospecting and was stone broke. But this was a condition which both Alva and he had anticipated and it did not weigh heavily on them. Alva only compressed her lips and settled down to wait and Donald proceeded to work his way lightheartedly across the hot miles to Ely and the copper camps of eastern Nevada. Here he stayed for the best part of a year, writing her at frequent or infrequent intervals according to whether he was working in a mine so as to save money for a prospecting trip or was out on the "hike" with his burros. Once or twice, he wrote, he had been offered a position which might have led up to a good salary but, as he took pains to remind her, that was precisely the kind of delay he had planned to avoid. Men all around him were finding and selling valuable properties every day, he said, and he meant to be one of the dis-

coverers. Then came a long and dreadful wait of six months, sterile of letters, and, as if to compensate, a lightning flash out of the blue in the shape of a telegram from Idaho saying that he had found something at last and was on his way to New York to negotiate its sale.

Alva was waiting at the Grand Central Station when his train came in. Their meeting, which was observed by several hundred commuters and some red capped porters, was at the least a pictorial success. After which there was a profligate expenditure for a taxicab and a joyful dinner at the Leigh apartment, where Rutherford Leigh beamed on the two out of his fast increasing mental haze and shivered for the last of his *objets d'art* whenever the younger man stretched his legs.

Donald was unquenchably optimistic. He had somehow heard of a silver-lead mine up in Idaho whose owners had run out of money and might be approached on the subject of a sale, and he had taken a chance and gone up to examine it. It had needed only a cursory inspection to prove its value, even though it was twenty miles from the railroad and a good strong bluff had put him in possession of an

option at a ridiculously low figure for sixty days. He had promptly wired some classmates of his who were down in the "Street" and was going to see them in the morning. As for the future, there wasn't any doubt about that any longer. The main thing now was to have a good time whenever he could get away from his deal while they were waiting for it to be closed up.

And so Alva's period of waiting seemed not so very terrible after all. And Donald's plan, concerning which she had begun to have serious misgivings, had worked out in spite of the slings and arrows of his first misfortunes. As the wondering girl listened to the amazing stories of his adventures and smiled covertly at the undismayed power of the voice resounding through the tiny room, where dinner was generally as subdued a meal as breakfast, he seemed for a moment to be almost a stranger, so radically different was he in looks and viewpoint from the boy of a year and a half ago. But when her father excused himself and the breezy young miner from the trackless desert charged around the table and swept her up with a chuckle of delight, the new light in his eyes and the bronzed cheeks and unfamiliar clothes

and the whole wondrously increased breadth and strength of him were accepted without reserve as part and parcel of the new, successful, love-hungry Donald, and she gave herself up to his arms with a joy that grew with the feeling that she was, in some way, being conquered for a second time.

The first few weeks of Donald's negotiations turned out, in spite of his irrepressible optimism, about as might be expected. In theory Wall Street is a place of enthusiasms, but in practice at least one side of it is inhabited by congenital pessimists. The other side, after listening silently and very shrewdly, will sometimes offer to furnish certain enthusiasms of a stipulated length and breadth and color—but only at a price. Donald discovered slowly that the Street was less a place for buying than for selling, and that nearly every man he met had something to sell.

Many of his old friends were, however, unaffectedly glad to see him, though they said very frankly that they didn't know much about mines in Idaho and didn't expect to. Others said it was very kind of him to drop in and then made mention of the "four thirty-two" which they generally caught. Finally, when

three weeks out of the precious sixty days were gone and the clouds had begun to gather, he brought back the report to Alva that he had at last, by the blindest kind of luck, run across a man who took some interest. Caswell—a chap he'd barely known at college but who, it seemed, had followed his athletic career with envy and admiration for the reason that he himself was helplessly fat and hopelessly a hero worshiper. So, then, there were many meetings with Caswell, the fortunately rich, fat boy, and some of Caswell's friends and an engineer whom some person of an investigating turn of mind had thought to bring in at the last moment. And Donald took heart again, although the engineer would need a dangerously long time for his examination and report, and he and Alva proceeded to give themselves up to dreams while they waited.

By this time all of Alva's girl friends and most of her bowing acquaintances knew that she was engaged. The proportion of interested males, however, began rapidly to dwindle. There were theater parties and dinner dances to which she and Donald were asked, but while she would have been considered a possibility if the Leigh fortune had been in existence the

combination of straitened circumstances and an engagement ring put her out of the running. To which Alva objected not at all and was even a little relieved when the invitations slackened with Lent, and Donald stopped drinking too much champagne.

Right here was something that worried the girl not a little. It was not that his voice grew thick or his limbs unsteady when he drank something more than the social allowance, for his big body seemed equal to almost anything, but because he seemed, in some undefinable way, curiously to coarsen. At such times he had the unfortunate habit of retailing wild stories of his adventures which held something more than the flavor of purely animal spirits. Few girls in Alva's position are apt to be hypercritical and yet, now and then, Alva seemed to catch a view of a rather undesirable Donald—as if his stories opened a door through which she could glimpse tawdry amusements and questionable nights.

But it was not long before such questions became of no importance beside that of the deal down in the "Street." Caswell's engineer had come back from Idaho with only ten days to spare before the option expired and was

methodically drawing up an elaborate report on what he had found, while Donald writhed at the delay and demanded to know why the old fool hadn't written out what he wanted to say while he was coming east on the train. Each morning of that last week Alva had a telephone message from him saying that he expected to close up the deal that day, and every evening, without coming to see her, he sent back a depressing report of interfering engagements in Caswell's office, of men who couldn't be got together and of a multitude of unforeseen delays. Finally, one night at nine o'clock the door bell rang and Donald appeared. When she saw his face Alva knew he had failed.

"Yes. It's all fallen through," he said sadly as her arms went quickly round him in the little hallway. "Caswell's engineer took five days and fifteen typewritten pages to say that the property was too far from a railroad. When they heard that they said they hadn't any doubt but that it would pay somebody to work it, but just at present the state of the market didn't allow their making any extensive investments. They haven't got the *nerve*, that's what's the matter," he broke out, with

a flood of anger. "These measly pups that have never been west of the Hudson River think the West exists to bring them good things without their raising a hand or risking a cent. They think a fellow ought to hand them a mine on a silver platter. They want a big producer with a couple of millions in values blocked out right at the back door of a smelter. And then they want to give you a check on the bank for a rubber nickel. They make me *sick*," he snarled. "Thank God I don't live in this rotten town and I'm going to pull my freight out of here as quick as I can. I've had enough of their two-by-four ways and I'm going back to God's Country and get some action on this proposition. There's a man in Salt Lake that'll listen when I talk and he likes to see his money earning something for him. You won't catch *him* trying to scratch the face off a double eagle before he spends it. He's a live one and a gambler. He'll grab this property quick as a wink and I'm going to make the jump out there to-night."

"*To-night!*" Alva gasped.

"Yes. *Now*," he answered, and she saw he was haggard with worry. "I've bought my ticket and checked my stuff. I made up my

mind this afternoon. I've just five days in which to make Salt Lake, get some money out of this fellow and make a payment on my option. I ought to have tackled him long ago. What a fool I was to come here, anyway!"

He rose to go, his hat in his hand. Then his face worked strangely. He gathered her, dazed and wordless, into his arms.

"It's dreadful, dreadful, I know," he cried brokenly. "But, what ever can we do? We can't get married before I have some sort of a home to offer you and I've got to take this chance—perhaps another like it won't come up for years. And the minute things are right I'll send for you. We'll get away from this rotten city and live out where people are big and human. I'll have you West inside six months just as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow morning."

And then, with a sudden, joyful return to the old Donald, in which were mingled the light hearted boy of their wonderful summer and the forceful, optimistic man of a few weeks ago—"They *can't* keep me down," he cried and she felt his body tighten under her arms. "I *will* succeed. It's in my bones. I'll go and go and *go*. And every move I make, every

dollar I earn will always be for *you*, Alva. Now and evermore."

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Down on the street a man came out of an apartment building and turned towards Broadway. For a block or two he walked at a rapid nervous pace and then his steps grew slower. He stopped to light a cigarette and stood, moody and irresolute, on a corner, his hand closing over a small roll of bills in his pocket. One by one his fingers counted them over and separated out the few crisp fives and tens, while his lips moved in slow calculation. When he had made his total he shot a glance up at the massive blocks of apartments around him, and estimated their cost—and laughed. His little roll of bills might as well be in the river.

Stepping into a corner café he ordered a drink and stared at himself dully in the mirror. His train didn't go until midnight and he had two hours to waste. It seemed better to amuse himself drinking than to lie in his berth with the thoughts of his failure eating his heart out, and so, presently, he motioned to the bartender again. There was no one in the place besides himself and as, comforted

by his drink, he walked about nibbling at the free lunch and glancing at the papers he caught a glimpse of the back-room, with its atmosphere of sequestered conversation. It was a particularly inviting room, with low burning lights in candelabra with colored shades on the small, intimate tables and not without suggestion of illicit acquaintance.

Something impish in its quick birth started up in the man's mind. Something questionable but luring, born of his late failure and his drink and the recklessness that was as much a part of him as his big limbs and hot young heart. He opened the swinging door and looked in.

A girl, conspicuously young and undeniably good-looking, sat alone at one of the tables. He caught a glimpse of a silken ankle, a prettily rounded arm and white neck. The delicious scent of Djer-Kiss was wafted to him, stirring his blood. His eyes drew hers and she looked up. Her glance was soft-eyed as it rested on him and presently her fresh young lips parted easily over exquisite teeth, and she smiled.

"Lonely, are you?" she asked.



PART TWO
THE WEST

CHAPTER I

WHEN Alva Leigh came home to her apartment in the dusk of the late February afternoon, she saw that her companion, Miss Ferguson, had come in before her and had lighted the electric above the little mahogany table in the hallway, so that Alva would not miss seeing the letter and roll of papers that had come for her.

A few years before, Alva would have opened both before she took off her overshoes, or put her dripping umbrella in its stand, but she was now in mourning for the third time in her life, and she was also nearing the end of her second year in the public library on Forty-second Street, so that the arrival of mail no longer seemed to call for instant inquiry into its contents. She glanced instinctively at the address of the letter, however, because she had not heard from Donald since

September. But the letter bore only a New York City postmark instead of one from California, and she saw that it was from the firm of Bagby & Vining, Attorneys and Counselors at Law, 52 William Street.

Alva sighed. She realized that probably old Mr. Bagby wished to tell her something about her Uncle 'Tonio's bequests, and the thought brought up poignant memories of Antonio De la Fuente's kindnesses to her, an orphan.

Alva's mother had been a De la Fuente, and Alva's dark eyes and glowing pallor, and sometimes the carriage of her head, especially when she was offended, proved her Spanish ancestry beyond much doubt. When she had gone to Farmington as a schoolgirl some ten years before, her chums had dubbed her "Carmen" almost on the first day, and had insisted on black-browed poses, with a murderous-looking can opener flashing out from under a petticoat mantilla, while everyone else lolled on her bed, applauded, and ate strange mixtures of sardines and fudge.

But the Leigh part of Alva was measurably the stronger, and it was because she had resented Antonio De la Fuente's contempt for

her father's business ability that she had never allowed her Uncle 'Tonio to help her. She had always been fond of the quiet, dark little man with the wise, wrinkled old eyes and sympathetic smile, who shipped things back and forth across the seas from his spice-redolent offices down at Bowling Green, but the Puritan strain in the girl insisted grimly on loyalty to her father's memory, and so, when she had been left alone in the world, she had preferred to earn her own way instead of living on her uncle's money. She knew that she had offended the old gentleman terribly by so doing, and she was sorry that this was so, but she could not see that he respected her the less for it. In fact, she saw now that they two had always understood each other perfectly, and when she went to dine with him at his quiet hotel on Madison Avenue, or sent him a gift at holiday time, it was with a genuine welling up of affection whose only stumblingblock was her pride.

Alva took off her street dress and freshened herself. Standing before her glass, she saw that she did not look as old as she felt tonight—that she was as beautifully bodied and as satin-skinned as anyone she knew, while

the starlike eyes that burned back at her out of the palely glowing face in the mirror were strong with health and vitality. But this was because she spent as much time as she could in the open air. Several of her old friends who had married well had places on Long Island and in the Westchester hills, and Alva's week-ends, when she took them, were packed with exercise.

In town, however, her amusements were few. Sometimes she lunched at the Holland House and went to a *matinée* with Natalie Warren, who persistently refused to give up her old roommate, and always scolded her roundly on the way home in the limousine, and sometimes she dined with Sally Lowe and her husband over on the Drive, because Alva's father had once taken Sally abroad with them as Alva's chum. But although Alva Leigh could have gone almost where she liked among the big houses that border on the park, she had willfully allowed her circle to contract year by year until she had almost dropped out of sight. And now she was bereft even of the Warrens and the Lowes, for Natalie was up the Nile and Sally's husband had suddenly

made a lot of money, and carried her off to Rome for a second honeymoon.

Alva thought of Natalie's last letter. Natalie knew why Alva had not married, and, writing from Shepperd's before they started, Mrs. Warren had expressed herself as finally out of patience.

"You have waited entirely too long," she had said. "No man nowadays has the right to ask a girl to wait for him longer than two years. Everyone knows that mining men have their ups as well as their downs, but I think it is too much to stake a woman's youth against the possibility of finding some gold some time, somewhere in a rock! Jim says Donald ought to do his mining in Wall Street. Forgive me, dear. You know how strongly I feel."

Alva compressed her lips and went on with her dressing. She wondered what Natalie would have said if she'd known that Donald hadn't written to her for six months. Then she turned her back to the light over her dressing table and opened Mr. Bagby's letter.

A few moments later Miss Nannie Ferguson, thin, fifty, and Scotch, whose ancient

heart was still all unscarred by Man, received a distinct shock. Alva Leigh was standing in her doorway, her face ablaze with emotion.

"Nannie," she said, in a constrained voice, "I think our troubles are nearly over. *My uncle has made me his sole heir!*"

A moment or two necessarily had to be allowed the cautious Scot before she accepted the probability of this astounding statement. But when the first outburst was over and they were seated side by side on the narrow Ferguson bed, Nannie showed that her eye for the main chance was by no means dimmed by the glamour of such miraculous good fortune.

"And *now* you can marry your man!" she said.

"And now I can marry—marry Donald!" Alva repeated, and her face shone as if lighted from within. "Oh, Nannie! Nannie! How did you know?"

"Know?" echoed the Scotswoman. "I know everything—and I know nothing. I know that you've been truer to this invisible young man for four long years than I fear I would be to the Angel Gabriel if I saw him every day. And I know that he must be a verra extraordinary man for a girl like you

to be thinking about for so long, much to the discouragement of others. I've seen his picture, and he has a bonnie face. More I canna say. Will ye no tell Nannie about him, dear?"

Alva turned a suffused face, then dropped her eyes and sought the other woman's hand.

"Oh, Nannie, dear—it's been such *wearry* waiting!" she cried. "I could tell you every word he's ever said or written since the day we met, and where I saw him first, and what he thinks about, and how he talks, every gesture he makes, every turn of his head! But, oh—it all seems so far away now! I've thought about him for so many days and nights and weeks and months—I've thought—I've thought—" Her hand went to her throat as if she were suffocating.

"Child, you have thought too much," said Nannie. "Now that everything will turn out right, you must take a rest from thinking. You met him four years—no, five years ago—"

"Just after he came out of the School of Mines. But he had nothing in sight at that time—we knew we must wait. And so he went West. Oh—he's so tall and so strong, Nannie, and so *recklessly* brave! He would go anywhere—do anything—to succeed, he

said—and he has. But things have been against him. Two years ago he came back here to interest some people downtown in a mine in Idaho—”

“And to see you.”

“And to see me. But he couldn’t get them to do anything—he went away very badly discouraged.” Alva’s voice deepened, her face shadowed, she seemed on the point of entering her state of gentle melancholy again.

“Sakes alive, child!” cried Nannie, with a vigorous shake. “What do ye care about that noo? Can ye no buy him all the mines there are in this Idaho with your bright new siller? But I’m thinking you two will have little to do with mines from now on. You’ll bring him back soon?”

“He’ll come back—he’ll come back as soon as a telegram can reach him and a train can carry him East!” Alva cried, throwing out her arms. “And *then*, Nannie!” A realization of how completely the making of their happiness now rested in her hands swept over the girl and her voice failed her.

Nannie Ferguson gently stroked the hand closed tight on hers, and studied the girl’s face. She loved Alva very much. The girl’s

nature was the most unselfish she had ever known, and added to the courage and high-mindedness that everyone recognized at once, Alva had an infinite number of lovable ways that showed themselves in the smaller things of life.

When Nannie had first come to live with her two years before, she had been surprised to find a woman with Alva's connections moving in so small a social orbit without serious discontent. But she had learned little by little that while Alva was tremendously sensitive as to her father's financial collapse and her altered position, yet she never allowed these things to affect her relations with those around her. People who did not know Alva Leigh intimately sometimes thought her peculiar, but Nannie had found that this was due to the girl's unfailing faith in the man she had set her heart upon. Alva's pride forbade her taking up her old life again until she could do so as a successfully married woman. There was nothing more than that. The girl had simply been holding fast with unswerving allegiance to the chance for happiness that the future *must* bring.

But the shrewd Scotchwoman had never al-

lowed her affections to warp her abilities to analyze, and she had been aware for some time past that the girl's attitude toward Donald Jaffray was undergoing a serious change. It was only natural that Alva should brood, but when Nannie saw that the girl was beginning to think more of marriage than of the man, she began to feel frightened. She knew the force of the girl's character, sweet-natured though she was, and she was afraid that it was being turned in the wrong direction. Alva's single-mindedness on the subject of her future life seemed about to turn into plain obsession.

But that grave danger was over now, thank Heaven! And the wonderful light that shone in Alva's face was only a faint promise of the transfiguration soon to take place.

"You darling woman!" Nannie whispered softly. "You—with your head like a Spanish queen's, and your beautiful, strong body, and your wonderful love that's like both a sweetheart's and a mother's for your boy! Why! if I were a man, with a man's blood and fire in me, wild horses couldn't have torn me away from you! And just to think that *now* you're to be married, after all!"

"Married, *after all!*" cried Alva a little wildly, while Nannie bit her lips over the unfortunate phrase, "and *why not?* Haven't I waited? Haven't I been true? Haven't I loved him since the day we met? Life promised him years ago and life must give him to me now. Only one thing in the world can interfere. It's the very thing that has kept us apart, but it shall do so no longer. I've given him my youth to satisfy his pride—now he must stop our senseless sacrifices and listen to reason. It's time for us to *live*. Life is slipping too fast out of our fingers! I shall demand—"

"Child! Child! What are you saying?" Nannie interrupted, with a frightened gesture. "You'll no be '*demanding*' anything. Sit down again and calm yourself. Your good news has upset you."

Alva held her hand over her eyes for a moment and pulled herself together.

"Nannie," she said, with a sobbing laugh, "I'm so happy that I guess I'm losing my mind."

"You'll not lose your mind while *I'm* here," said Miss Ferguson forcefully. "You'll feel better after we've had our dinner."

The girl bent down and kissed the faded cheek.

"Look at me, Nannie," she said, with shining eyes. "I'm all right now. I lost my hold on myself for a moment, but it won't happen again. Perhaps our troubles were ended too quickly—or perhaps I've always imagined them greater than they really were. At any rate, the sour, dour Alva that you've been good enough to live with for two dark years herewith flits away, never, never, *never* to return." And Alva whirled out of the room with a pæan of joy.

"I'm going to see what's in this paper," Nannie heard her saying, in a voice like a song. "It's a marked copy of a little newspaper they publish out there in that new mining camp. I've had them before, and they're screamingly funny." She came back into the room tearing the wrapper from the paper and rolling it into a ball to hurl at Nannie.

"Just *think* of the fun if Donald had struck it rich, after all!"

"Aye," said the Scotchwoman. "I've heard of the West. 'Tis a place where strange things happen."

And then she looked up and saw that something strange was happening there in her own room before her very eyes. For Alva, with a bloodless face, was sinking slowly to the floor.

Donald had met with an accident. Donald had been shot.

Donald——was dead.

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Old Mr. Bagby, of Bagby & Vining, sat in his office waiting for Antonio De la Fuente's niece to be announced.

He had had charge of his friend De la Fuente's legal matters for a great many years, nearly half a century, in fact, and in that time he had come to know all that there was to know concerning the De la Fuentes and the Leighs. He had not seen Alva, however, since she was a girl of eighteen and, as usual, he expected to see her comparatively unchanged. He was prepared, of course, to find her spirits affected by her uncle's death, but he did not imagine that they would be permanently dampened.

He was much surprised, therefore, to find Miss Leigh not only a grown woman, but also one who, he saw at once, had lately experienced a very great shock. As he pressed her

hand for a moment with his soft, old fingers and smiled comfortingly and led her to a chair, he felt that the intense sadness in her face could not have been caused entirely by her uncle's death.

And so he spoke pleasantly of the last time he had seen her—only a year or so ago, he said, at which Alva smiled faintly—and told her of an act of kindness that her father had once done him in their early life, and very soon established an *entente cordiale* such as old gentlemen, when they are deft as well as kind, have a way of bringing about.

And presently the talk turned on her uncle's affairs, and Alva learned that the business of De la Fuente y Cia was being continued as before—that it was a very profitable business—and that while she was now a wealthy woman, she would undoubtedly be much richer as time went on. Mr. Bagby was one of the executors under the will, and an officer of the company, and all her interests were being scrupulously cared for. After which she found her Uncle 'Tonio's old friend mentioning other things that did not greatly matter, and giving her opportunity for any questions she might like to ask.

"I have decided to go away for a time," Alva said finally, at which Mr. Bagby nodded approvingly.

"Abroad, no doubt," he said. "Please do not hesitate to have this office, or your own, help you in making your arrangements. Of course, you know you can spend virtually any amount you choose."

"I am not going abroad," Alva answered. "But I should like you to give me some money, and I shall leave instructions with you as to forwarding my mail. I shall also make my will."

Mr. Bagby gravely inclined his head. He was beginning to surmise that the saddened, but remarkably fine-looking, Miss Leigh was a purposeful woman.

"I should like to have the will drawn up *now*, if I may—and make the other arrangements, too."

"All that will be done immediately," Mr. Bagby said. "Would you care to tell me where you are going? And how long you may be gone?"

"I am going to California—to a place they call '*Death Valley*,'" Alva said. "That is why I wish to make my will. It may be that I shall never return."

CHAPTER II

A NIGHT wind, sweet with sage, streamed down the slopes of the Funerals and pulsed across a valley that had not yet been named. Concentrating at the mouth of Dead Horse Cañon, whose winding cut through the sandstone led down to a vaster and still more barren basin beyond, its quickening breath stirred the flames of a fire crackling in the sand of the wagon road, and whirled the sparks aloft in a gleaming spiral.

It caught up a whirl of dust, too, and flung it spitefully into the face of a woman who stood waist deep in the greasewood, staring into the fire with wide, frightened eyes. Then the space-filling whirl of the wind died away and the valley grew silent again—silent and impenetrable under a starless pall. Only there came from a distance the spasmodic galloping of a team of horses still held together by fragments of harness, and, from near by, the ironic crackle of flames around the name board of what, a little while before, had been

the two-seated Magnet Stage with its load of mail and baggage—"Passengers and express carefully transported between Amargosa and Death Valley."

With the slackening of the fire, the woman raised her fascinated eyes from the ruins, and moved a few steps away, striving to follow the vague ribbon of a road that faded into the west. As she stood so, staring hopelessly into the darkness, a sound of feet plodding through the soft, stone-crustrated surface of the plain came to her ears. Another moment and the bulk of a horse and rider loomed up in front of her, grotesque and misshapen in outline. Dismounting a few feet away, the horseman left his animal standing with down-dropped rein, and came forward.

They faced each other across the embers of the fire, a tall woman with a queenly head of dark hair and dark, steady eyes, and a man a year or two her senior, whose oil-smeared khaki and flannel shirt indicated employment near by, just as his quiet face promised honesty. Oddly enough, there was no need of explanations as to what had happened, for the stranger seemed to have a complete understanding of the situation. Her frown re-

laxed almost immediately when she saw his face in the firelight, and she went to him, pointing to a huddled shape a few feet away in the brush.

"The driver is over *there*," she said, unconscious of her low-voiced, tragic tones. "The horses kicked him in the head when they ran away."

"I'll look at him," the man answered pleasantly, but without haste, and he musingly touched a loop of glowing baling wire with the toe of his boot. "It will be 'Alkali Bill'—judging from general results. Whisky and cigarette sparks seem to have been right active to-night. You carried some hay, I see."

"He *would* smoke—and drink," she stated tensely. "Before I knew it, we were all ablaze."

The man bent over the body and struck a match. She could see him only dimly as he knelt down, trying to catch a heartbeat, but once she was certain that she saw him studying his watch, which she thought curious. When he came forward again, he no longer wore his coat.

"He's in bad shape—we'll have to get him

later," he said briefly, and she felt herself maneuvered into a position where the firelight shone directly on her face. "Did you save any of your baggage?"

"All I had," she answered, conscious of his eyes. "A shawl strap and a suit case. I was very fortunate."

"Yes, ma'am. Very lucky," he responded, in his easy way, and still studied her over the hand that stroked his down-drooping, yellow mustache. "If you don't mind, perhaps we could be going on about now. Magnet's not far. I'll get my horse."

With the animal standing beside her, she looked up into its owner's face with an expression of surprise. The unknown Samaritan's actions were so direct as hardly to give her time to appreciate their purposes.

"Am *I* to ride?" she asked, and then realized that the question sounded foolish, even in her own ears.

"If you please, ma'am," as he shortened the stirrups and held one of them for her. "You might hold your suit case in front of you on the pommel. The other can go behind. There you go! Fine!" And after a rapid

fastening of the shawl strap at the cantle, he turned away from the fire, leading her mount by the rein into the vague roadway.

The woman balanced her luggage on the rocking pommel as best she could, and gave herself up to wonder. Hardly ten minutes ago she had been marooned on an unknown desert in impenetrable darkness. Now she found herself suddenly picked up and carried on her way again with a swiftness of action as unerring as it was amazing. It was a far cry from the security of last night's Pullman to riding out, she knew not with whom or whither, into this wide-stretching, unknown land where the very bulk of the wind meant vastness, and she felt her courage falter. Then it leaped up again stronger than ever as they gained the summit of a swell, and saw a blurred gleam of white in the distance.

"Is *that* Magnet?" she asked, the words breaking from her with a cry.

Unstartled, the man let her animal come up to him, and answered her with thought, or else its amused counterfeit, in his tones.

"Well, now—it *is* little, isn't it?" he mused. "However could I have figured it was a 'city'!

But we're only a year old, ma'am. We'll grow."

He continued to walk at the horse's head until the blur took on the shape of tiny one and two-roomed tent houses, scattered along a street of two short city blocks in length, which faded away up the western slope of the valley towards an opaque sky.

They paused again, and the woman stared at her goal with a clutching around her heart.

"You have friends here, have you?" the man asked, in a detached tone.

"No. No friends," she answered helplessly, unable to take her eyes off the place she had thought of, night and day, for so many months.

"H'mmm!" he mused. "In that case, you will not be accustomed to the ways here." There was light enough from the tents now to see her face, and he looked up with a direct and succinct remark: "This is no *pink-tea* place."

"I know that," the woman answered curtly, then bit her lip. Not yet there—and she had already made a misstep.

But her guide only nodded pleasantly.

"Still—a pink tea would be a mighty interesting affair, I judge. The postmaster's wife could just about die from attention; 'most any day, as it is."

Her hand went up to her cheek in amazement.

"Are there no other women? I thought I saw one at the door of a tent."

"Mrs. Baker and you will be the only ladies, ma'am," he answered definitely. "I'm taking you to her place."

Up the straggling street between the glow-worm tents the woman rode in the soft spring night on the stranger's horse, acutely observant of every make-shift for comfort seen through open doorways, keenly conscious of men—nothing but men—around her, behind her, in front of her; dawdling on doorsteps, passing by in the darkness in murmuring twos and threes, clustered around the bars of saloons where raucous-voiced phonographs guttered forth their travesties on music, and drunken songs and still more drunken laughter roared up to God's clean stars, now gleaming whitely overhead.

Again the unfamiliar feeling of helplessness clutched at the woman's heart. Men—

nothing but men—men in the rough, like the mines that had given this mushroom its riotous growth, and she only a solitary, friendless woman, with merely a purpose, which already seemed more like a forlorn hope, to hug to her breast for company.

At the end of the street her guide halted in front of a one-storied, unpainted frame building and spoke to a woman seated in the doorway.

"I guess you won't get a whole lot of mail to-night, Mrs. Baker," he said, in his pleasant voice. "I've brought you a boarder, instead. This lady has come to Magnet—to—to—" He paused and turned around.

"To stay," the woman on horseback supplied firmly, but without sharpness. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get down."

"Why, yes. Come right in," Mrs. Baker responded, in matter-of-fact tones. "You can sleep on a cot in the mail room, dearie. The Palace Hotel hasn't established its branch here yet. Where's the funny old mail, Mr. Randall?"

"Burned up, along with the stage," he answered, as he carried the baggage through the post office into a lighted room beyond.

"Alkali's been playing tricks on us again."

"That's twice this year already," the motherly-looking postmistress mused. "Folks will be complaining soon. Will you take your hat off, dearie? It's certainly a good thing Mr. Randall managed to find you—out there in the desert and all."

The traveler removed her hat and looked up at the tall man who had brought her safely through the darkness.

Her first impression, now that she could see him clearly, was that he was thoroughly a man in face as well as in figure. His nose was sensitive and straight. His mouth, half hidden by the drooping, fine-haired mustache, she could not see, but his chin, indented, was unquestionably a chin, and his fine hazel eyes were both luminous and steady. In spite of his working clothes, he looked very clean, and, in some indefinable way, almost certainly a gentleman.

Her second impression, which came from something behind his repose of manner, was that this gravely smiling man, who seemed to be studying her closely for a second time, was to become either her very good friend or else something radically different. A third im-

pression, which she did not care to retain, was that his was the stronger personality of the two.

But while she was speaking her thanks, all these appraisals were forgotten in a handclasp so firm and wonderfully sympathetic as to pour a warming current of life into her tired body.

"Don't thank *me*, ma'am. A woman at Death Valley is worth even more than water—and *that's* fifteen dollars a barrel! Why—if I don't hurry along right now for poor Alkali, there'll be a committee camping on my trail with a wine supper!" He retreated, laughing, to the edge of the darkness, and picked up his horse's rein, swinging up to the saddle as easily as if it were early morning.

"So long, Mr. Randall," called the frankly admiring Mrs. Baker. "Get that Baker of mine away from the 'high card' long enough to help with Bill!"

"Good night," the Samaritan responded. He drew the rein against his animal's neck to wheel away, then paused and looked back with a sudden tenseness of pose that seemed to make his farewell carry the more surely past the postmistress to the traveler.

“Good night—*Miss Leigh.*”

The woman in the doorway drew back with a gasp and stood there, staring mutely, until the other woman woke her from her amazement and led her to the room where she was to pass the night.

He had spoken her name!

And in this manner Alva Leigh came to the mining camp of Magnet, on the edge of Death Valley, unheralded through three thousand miles of travel, only to hear her name spoken out of the darkness on the first night by an unknown man whom she might never see again.

CHAPTER III

IN the morning she rose early, glad to escape the unfamiliar angles of the Baker cot, and studied the town from the doorway, her thoughtful face brightening at the wild freshness of the air and the wonderful, clean sunlight.

Before her a single street of tents—tent stores and garishly fronted tent saloons—ran down a gentle slope into a gray-green valley of plummy sage and greasewood, whose other side was a range of barren, chocolate-colored rhyolite. Beyond this, one after another, sterile chains of hills, yellow and flaring red and bluish gray, reared their spiny backs in serried rank until, across a vast, twinkling desert, the snow-tipped spear of Charleston Peak emerged from the mists and hung like a cold, white cloud, high in the sky.

Although her journey had left her by no means unprepared for the sight, the searching light of morning brought home the vastness of the view and its cruel barrenness with

unescapable force. Coming out of a land of little hills, always decently garmented with earth, she found herself set down in the midst of great ragged ranges as naked as the teeth of a saw. All her life Alva had been among green things, living things, houses, factories, stores, smoking chimneys—within hearing distance of people and the world's noises. Here was none of that—no green on the bare-toothed mountains—nothing of life and its activities beyond an occasional sound from the street—nothing to dispel a frightening sensation of loneliness in this vast, thirsty land of reds and yellows, where daring men braved the perils of heat and silence to dig ore out of the hot hills, live a few vivid years of work and reckless pleasure, and then withdraw again, leaving behind them their youth, some holes in the ground, and a grinning stretch of sand and hills that would keep on grinning until the Judgment Day.

She looked again at the town with its dismaying clutter of ramshackle wagons, broken boxes, refuse, and glittering tin cans—at the unfamiliar head-frames of the shafts—at the figures of men in their working clothes now turning out for the morning drink and break-

fast, and wondered—wondered where she was to begin.

With breakfast over, she turned to washing dishes as the easiest route to the knowledge that she must have, and, in due time, found part of it.

“Baker was wondering last night what you were figuring to do here,” the postmistress remarked leadingly, as her observant eyes roved over Alva’s handsome face and noted her ready disposal of the kitchen tasks. “But I told him you were looking for work, like as not.”

“Yes. I expect to work,” was the immediate reply, for Alva’s instinct told her that she must justify her presence in Magnet without loss of time. “I must work at something right away. You all ‘take a chance’ out here—and so will I.” Which facile expression of Western philosophy in her own voice so amazed her that she flashed a warm smile at the other woman, and thereby cemented a friendship already in the making.

Yet Mrs. Baker’s legitimate curiosity was not entirely appeased, and she let fall another remark.

“Not knowing where you come from, and

nothing about you, I couldn't see it was a whole lot of Baker's business," she continued. "Mebbe she'll run a little store, I says—or mebbe a boarding house. No woman, I says, is coming into *this* layout of country without knowing her own mind, you bet.

"Now, a boarding house—well—that would be *my* choice. Not a single, solitary one here to-day except 'Stingy Pete's' short-order dump back of the Red Onion, and that's only 'Tee bones—French fried—Eggs-any-way—and Coffee.' And, *say!* For a *single* girl, what with these rich Easterners and mining men coming here in their automobiles a-looking at mines, and all the nice young fellows working round—well, a boarding house, for real, high-toned society *and* money, surely does look good to me."

Alva Leigh, listening intently as she dried dishes, thanked her stars that Magnet held a Mrs. Baker. But she knew that, while her purpose might always be her own, she could not keep silent about herself forever, and so expressed her surprise at the difference between New York and the West in various vague ways that intimated future confidences.

"But it's a hard life," the Westerner said,

as she paused in her work and stared thoughtfully out of the window at the lifeless hills. "Just why Baker and me stick at it—I dunno. Times we make a little money on a claim or something, and times we don't. Times we live down to 'Los' in a bungalow, with roses and geraniums smothering you to death with their funny smells, and other years we're out on the desert, polishing the head of a drill.

"But if Magnet makes good, we'll be fixed till kingdom-come, I guess. Baker's got good ground, and he's sure the ore is right. I only hope we can make some Easterner think so, too. They're getting to know entirely too much about mines, back there. One of them came here last winter in tortoise-shell eyeglasses and a thousand-dollar fur coat to look at our ground, and what do you suppose he said?

" 'Ah, ha!' says he, looking at me over his glasses like a wise little pig that's been fooled once on cactus. 'But does the ore go down, Mrs. Baker? That's the point on which you must satisfy me. Does it go *down*?' "

" 'Well,' says I, kind of tired, 'I don't know what you learn in your little books back East, but it's a lead-pipe cinch it don't go *up*, dearie!'

And with that he shut himself up in his big coat, and wouldn't peep.

"Baker only laughed when I said I'd spoiled his sale. Baker ain't bad—for a man. He's a Native Son of the Golden West, and *he* knows our luck will turn. Most likely he's testing it out on the wheel right now. We won three hundred last night.

"And yet I sort of like it all," Mrs. Baker went on, unmindful of the amazement in Alva's face. "It seems like this desert country gets a hold on you just because there ain't anything here! If I told anyone that I liked hot rocks better than trees, or sand better than nice green grass, they'd think I was crazy. But you'll see, dearie. You'll get to like it, same as me."

"Is Magnet a healthful place?" Alva asked presently. "Do many people die here?"

"Die? What for?" responded Mrs. Baker absently. "Oh, a few get shot up sometimes, and they were finally obliged to hang one man that pestered another fellow with an ax. The cemetery's right out behind us on the hill—you can see the headboards from the back window. Mostly, the eppygrams are fairly considerate. It's all over when he's dead, you

know. But Magnet's a pretty decent place—for a camp where there ain't any law."

"*What did you say?*" Alva asked sharply.

"No *law*, I said. No sheriff—no justice—no police—no nobody. But we get along. The Committee fixes things up, mostly. If the Local decides against a man, he has to go, and go *right away!* They sent out two this last week—fifty miles to the railroad—*and no water!*"

"Has there *never* been a sheriff?" Alva asked, while she tried to keep something out of her voice that persisted in creeping in.

"Not that I ever heard of. He's generally over at Independence, the county seat—four days' journey," the other woman answered, with a wondering glance at Alva's depressed face. "Oh, don't you worry, dearie. Nothing can happen to you. Give Magnet a little old-fashioned home cooking, and these men will rob a bank for you."

Alva spread her dishcloth out to dry on the window sill. "I think I'll take a walk up on the hill," she said. "I'd like to get a view of the town."

The Westerner nodded appreciatively.

"Yes. Go look round a bit," she said, in

her big, friendly way. "Go up on the top of the hill and look down into the valley. You'll see hell, then—sure enough."

"What valley?" Alva asked, without thinking.

"Death Valley. There ain't but one," was the reply. "*But don't look at it too long.* Folks have to keep happy out here," and Mrs. Baker's shrewd eyes seemed trying to read the girl's thoughts, "or else they go to brooding and get *queer*. But *you* won't be that kind, I guess. *You're* going to have *luck* in this place. I'm thinking you'll go out of here a great deal happier than when you came in."

Alva went out of the door with the honestly meant words repeating themselves over and over in her mind. Magnet and *luck*! Death Valley—and *happiness*! It was entirely possible that she might have luck, but it would be of a peculiar kind.

Five graves in all raised their small mounds in the scattered brush of the hillside, and, after looking about her to see if anyone were watching, she paused by the first, and read its inscription:

Jim Bellingham,
Died January 21st.

God gives a good deal to an honest dealer.

Alva wondered—and passed on, her brows darkening, her lips compressed. She saw that there were points of view that she would have to learn. Another grave, and she read:

Swiss Bob.

Fired his last shot, August 12th.

First man dead in camp. He went loco.

Some says heat—but we bet on whisky.

The woman made an involuntary sound of disgust. *Why* did men say such cruel things about one another? Had they no sense of decency or fitness? Yet the sardonic note did not escape her—a grim jest at the perils of this dreadful place where men never had been meant to live.

Two more mounds, with later dates, came under her eyes, and then, a little apart from the others and set in the soft, sandy earth below a reef of copper-stained rock, a headboard on which the writing, although dimmed by the elements, stood out with a clearness entirely sufficient:

Donald Jaffray,

February 10th.

Found shot.

"Found shot."

Well—at least there was nothing unnecessary written *there*.

Staring, dry-eyed, at the thing she had come those thousands of miles to see, the woman found herself thanking God that here truth had guided the writer's hand without a tremor. It was well worth her journey—worth all such troubles, past and to come—to find above his grave anything so packed with meaning as those two short words, for, to Alva Leigh, they meant justification. Just as she had always known since that dreadful day a month before, Donald had been murdered—brutally and with malice aforethought—and he who had shot him had run away.

Alva raised her head and looked out across the wide cup of the valley at the serried ranges. Wherever she dwelt again in memory's dreams, it was far from Magnet, for there were trees and grass and blessed water before her eyes, and murmuring in her ears a lovable, boyish voice, impetuously vowing something over and over again. Once more she saw him in all the splendor of his youth—tall, strong, alert, bright-haired, bright-eyed; a joking, fearless, impetuous man-boy, whose

tremendous physical vigor had been as much a source of fear for him as it had been a fascination in his love. Precious years of companionship, the ecstasy of being needed by another human, the fulfillment of life's purposes, the wider existence—these were the things, then, of which this place, had robbed her, for they all lay buried forever in the mound beneath her feet.

Yet, after all, it was the conviction of personal outrage that had most brought about her coming to this place. While Alva Leigh was as completely removed from vindictiveness as a woman may be, her passionate nature insisted that when life offered her the most desirable of all its gifts, and man ruthlessly swept it away, then someone beside herself must suffer.

But as she stood there on the hillside, she felt the tumult of her feelings gradually subside. At least one part of her task was done—she had found him. As to the rest of it, she realized very sensibly that only the merest beginning had been made. To learn all that she must know—to act on it and bring it to a just conclusion—would take time and

thought and care. Therefore, she would be thorough and unhurried. *Her* day would come—she had no fear of that.

And so this was where they had buried him!—here on these bright slopes where he had penciled his last letter to her months ago—here where he would be always looking out on the mystic desert twinkling at his feet. And, after all, what better place? Where would she herself have laid her lover down for his last sleep but on this sun-warmed hill-side, where his brave, steady eyes could gaze forever on the soft lure of the mountains and his beautiful body lie, dry and unsullied, in the virgin sand he loved?—a clean, warm winding sheet for one who had striven for *her* gain and *her* happiness in this frightful place, only to be wantonly cut down.

She thought of Mrs. Baker's prophecy.

"Then I wish for luck! God grant me *luck!*" she cried bitterly, but shuddered at the meaning she put into the bright word. "I will sow my life away in chances—only *let me reap!*"

As she turned away, a sound of voices came to her. Two men came into view on the dike

of rock above her, and stood with their backs toward her, absorbed in conversation.

"Leaving out the ground we're standing on, you can have the other five claims for a thousand dollars apiece," said a voice that she recognized. "I've been figuring to hold out *this* one for myself."

"And let *us* do your prospecting for you," was the intelligent response, as the other broke a fragment of ore over a sharp rock and weighed it instinctively in his hand before he studied it. "Come, now. Why don't you put a figure on this claim, too? I'll be perfectly frank and say it's the best of the lot."

"You don't have to be frank," was the amused reply. "I know it's the best. But I have another purpose for this ground."

To Alva, listening, came the realization that with the opening of a mine on that spot, the little cemetery would almost certainly pass out of existence. A faint chill stole over her. What would these men do to her grave?

"It might make all the difference to us," the other urged, with a note of warning. "Think it over."

"No use. I can't," came the answer,

tensely spoken. "The ground's too good. The man who originally owned this claim—"

The speaker paused as he became conscious of Alva, and she felt a pair of luminous hazel eyes center on her and instantly widen. Even before she could incline her head, he was leaving the other man and coming toward her with undisguised pleasure lighting up his face. Afterward, she remembered that, as this fine figure of a man strode across the rubble of rock, his eyes held hers so strongly as to be all of him that she really saw.

"I hope Magnet looks a little better to you than it did last night," he said, looking down at her with a warming smile, and somehow they were standing together with hands clasped as if they had been old friends. "Now that you're to be here for a while or so, you mustn't be too hard on us."

More than the words alone, the optimism in his face and voice acted on Alva like a jovial challenge, forcing her to throw off her melancholy. She caught, too, his appreciation that she was different from the others in Magnet. But this was not a matter for elation, for she felt that she was no more than on an equal footing with himself. An impression of the

night before was crystallizing into the knowledge that they two were of one kind.

The keen-eyed Eastern engineer, loitering near by, instinctively looked himself over at the sight of a woman and gave a constructive touch to collar and tie. Meanwhile, he furtively admired the large eyes shining out of their dark circles and the momentarily dramatic pose.

"Tragedy," he said to himself, and thought of paintings he had seen. "Tragedy, past or to come, or I've never seen it. Good stuff in *her*, all right. But she's too high tension—needs a 'step-down'—she'll burn herself out and get the 'loco.'" Then he bowed and walked over, at the other man's nod, to be presented.

"Miss Leigh—Mr. Garcelon, of Boston. You Easterners really ought to know each other as soon as possible—for protective purposes, I reckon."

"Are we going to let him classify us this way without protest, Miss Leigh?" the appraiser of mines asked quizzically, as he smiled over her hand. "I've been trying hard to be a Westerner for twenty years, and this is my reward—to have my unfortunate choice of a

birthplace flung in my face at every turn. Are you foolishly hoping to deceive them, too?"

"Yes, indeed," Alva answered, with an amused gleam in her fine eyes. "I'm a Western woman from to-day forward. But don't let me interrupt. Wasn't somebody buying something?"

"Well—I *was* trying to buy a cemetery for some friends of mine back East," the engineer responded jocularly. "But Randall, here—confound him—won't sell out."

Alva felt a change come over the Westerner's manner. He seemed to retard the humor in the other's eye while he made a grave reply whose poignancy was not lost, at least, upon the woman.

"Many a mine is a graveyard out here," he said soberly, "but sometimes we're just a little slow about reversing the two." He opened out his hand with a slow gesture of pity over the mound across which, Alva realized with a pang, they two had just now greeted each other. "These fellows all tried to do something—here in this God-forgotten country—against big odds, I reckon—but they got tired

out. Perhaps—perhaps they'd like it if we'd let them sleep."

Alva's eyes filled with tears, and she looked away toward the mountains. But she heard the thoroughly practical Easterner's surprise:

"You don't mean to say you'd let a little thing like a grave—"

"Well—for a while or so, at least," was the answer, and Alva knew that the transaction was ended.

Conscious that their thoughts had taken an unexpected turn, the three began a slow return to the town. Alva felt herself buoyed up by the virility of the two men and a conversation that had suddenly turned humorous. And while she followed the good-natured banter of East against West, she remembered that it might defeat her purposes to seem either nervous or worried. The things *she* had to do would take time. And so she entered into the amusing duel of wits with not a little pleasure, with the result that when she parted from them at the Baker doorstep, the middle-aged Easterner bowed impressively and took his leave in his best manner. He wondered, as he departed, if Magnet would see what he saw—

a place and a woman related one to the other in no conceivable way.

Alva made a delaying gesture as the other of the two was about to leave her.

"I've been wondering a little how you knew I was Miss Leigh," she said, curiously. "I didn't know that I'd mentioned my name to anyone here. Not that I wouldn't give it"—she smiled, for there must be no mystery—"only, it seemed rather queer."

"Yes." He nodded appreciatively, although he did not meet her eyes. "I understand. And you will be thinking about last night, too. But if you *will* write your name on a tag on your baggage—" His fine white teeth showed pleasantly in a smile over her perplexity, and he made the short open-handed gesture that seemed to do duty for so many words. "Out here ladies' names are easily remembered. But I will be going—about now," and his luminous eyes shone a temporary farewell. "Remember—I'm counting on you to let me help!"

"A nice man. A *real* nice man," the observant Mrs. Baker remarked, as Alva re-entered the house. "He's the biggest man in camp."

"What does he do?" asked Alva, for she knew that the time had come when she must learn everything about Magnet that was to be known.

"Dick Randall is hoist engineer for the Cactus Mining Company," replied Mrs. Baker promptly. "They're sinking a double-compartment shaft over in the North Gulch. From what I hear the men say, they'd rather work in the bottom of a shaft with Dick Randall's bucket hanging over them than any other man's in camp. He's a worker, and he don't drink. He's got the judgment, too—that's why he's president of the miners' Local here. And these miners wouldn't elect anybody who wasn't right. He has too much power, you see. Whatever Dick Randall says goes in Magnet—and no mistake about *that!*"

For a second time that day Alva felt herself singularly fortunate. If she had read aright the frank interest with which the man regarded her, she had made something more than an ordinary friend of the one person who could tell her all that was to be known. She began to feel, too, that he was one whom she might trust unquestioningly.

"Has he *always* been a hoisting engineer?"

she asked, with an interest that gave her a twinge.

"How do you mean?" was the puzzled query. "You mean—was he up in the world once—and down now? There ain't any good in those ideas, dearie. A man's a man—or he *ain't*! I guess he's got education enough for any *woman*—if that's what you're looking for. Dollars don't count for much out here, where a bum of a prospector can turn into a millionaire overnight. Randall's got claims enough—and good ones, too."

Alva, on her way back to her room, paused to think of a way to appease the offended Westerner, and then went on, her mind suddenly centering itself on a clear-cut recollection that drew her dark brows into a frown of perplexity.

Her baggage—the shawl strap and suit case—lay open on the floor of her room where she had left them. Around the handle of each she saw a piece of heavy twine and the eyelet of a card-board tag. It was quite true that she had written her name on the tags, as he had said, but it was also true, now that she remembered it, that she had destroyed the tags when she had left the train two days before.

As she stood there wondering, Mrs. Baker's voice came to her through the open doorway:

"Randall's going to make more money than any of us. He's relocated that cemetery claim that belonged to a young fellow named Jaffray, that got shot. Dick Randall is an *able man*."

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Alva came to look back on it, the most surprising phase of her establishment in Magnet was the ease of its accomplishment.

Blewitt, the professional optimist in the Town-site office, promptly leased her "the best corner lot in town—until we strike the sulphides." He also attempted a series of social calls in the evening, until Alva positively disclaimed all intention of buying Magnet real estate for permanent investment; whereupon the town-site man's optimism in both Love and Realty waned perceptibly and he finally exhibited a picture of his wife.

From the lumber yard, gleaming yellow in the gray-green flat below the town, came a discursive, calculating individual named "Andy," pleasantly redolent of sawdust, whose ever-present foot rule estimated successfully on a dining-room, kitchen, and living tent, with all materials supplied and work done.

A half hour in Palestine with Bindelmann,

of the Magnet Mercantile Company, brought an efficient six-hole range by special freight from somewhere in the outer world four days later.

The water man, whose teams brought Magnet's only supply from the spring at Ash Meadows, forty miles away, calculated Alva's needs at one barrel every two days, and said it would be only fourteen dollars "to a lady" and "no hurry about payment." Alva's interest was evenly divided between the water man's uncanny ability to drive twenty fractious animals with only a jerk line, and the astounding fact that he was making enough money to keep his daughter at a Conservatory.

The firewood difficulty, although apparently insurmountable, was finally solved by a young Mormon teamster who came to her rescue after her first collection of odds and ends had roared up the chimney. The boy, although not yet twenty-one, was pathetically strong in a faith whose strange tenets Alva strove in vain to appreciate, and was soon to be sent by his bishop on a "mission" to far-away Denmark, without the formality of even learning the language. Meanwhile, he drove unmeasured miles across the desert daily, and by his own confession dug

Alva's firewood out of the ground with a hoe! Which accomplishment did not diminish her respect for either his superior religious knowledge or his tenacity of purpose.

Shortly after this, a middle-aged person called "Sarah," with stringy, iron-gray locks and a suspicious nose—but who had "stopped drinking now"—suddenly appeared from nowhere at all and announced that she had come to do the cooking. With this last important asset obtained, and the hiring of two vague-faced waiters from the underworld of hobo-dom, Alva found her curious establishment complete.

"But don't you pay any of 'em one red cent till you get a good stake, Alva," Mrs. Baker warned innocently, as the two women sat together on a pile of fragrant lumber in the sagebrush and watched the dazzling white canvas of the dining tent being drawn over its framework. "Let 'em take a chance. We all do. Baker's out rustling boarders for you right now. He's got Levy Brothers of the Bon Ton Store promised good and hard, three nice gamblers from the Green Front, and a *very* good-looking man that they *think* robbed the Mohawk Mine in Goldfield, who has lots and

lots of money. He was figuring on bagging two Swedes that came in last night, too, but I says, 'No. Swedes eat all the ketchup. Just get white men for Alva. She'll have enough as it is.' And so you will. You'll take in a hundred dollars the very first week and be all clear by the end of the second. You just see if you don't."

The two weeks were over now, and Alva stood in her doorway in the late afternoon wondering how it all had happened. Not only had she twice as many boarders as she needed for appearance's sake, but this remarkable business seemed virtually to run itself, or else there was some wonderful stimulant in the wine-sweet air that made her act and think without an effort. But presently it came to her, since pride in her success as a boarding-house keeper had no place in her underlying intention, that *she* had not done it at all, but that those who knew had come and, with clear-sighted, efficient honesty, had done it all for her.

The afternoon sun softened and colored the bright ranges with slanting, wine-purple shadows. The panorama of flaming buttes and valleys and wide deserts turned into a vast, soft fairyland, where unfamiliar peaks swam

into view a hundred miles away through the haze, glimmered for a time, and then, suddenly, were gone, and dry lakes shimmered and lured and in their turn faded slowly from sight.

Alva's bosom swelled with a full inhalation of the sweet, keen air, while her limbs quivered with a moment's flashing joy in mere living. With clear, strong, newly brightened eyes, she searched her view hungrily for the fanciful mysteries her imaginative nature loved to create among those distant, blue-hazed hills, exalted by the mere sense of illimitable distance. She wondered how people could do wrong in so wonderful a land. How could men be wicked where the world was so wide and silent and where a human being was so very small? As for herself, it was like a great temple where she could worship silently, with the ever-whirring wind for a resonant-voiced chorister beneath a blue-vaulted roof that arched up from gleaming colonnades of hills.

The sun sank lower. The castled peaks marched forward in the reddening light, stood still, then dwindled away. The sky was a turquoise dome behind a bank of golden-crested buttes. "It's the outer gate of heaven," she

whispered to herself. "It brings me close to God."

Then her eyes strayed north to the cañon where Magnet's basin, narrowing, ran down to Furnace Creek and Death Valley. With its last slant the sun streamed through a split in the darkened western hills and smote the red porphyry cliffs of the gorge with a blaze of fiery light. Alva shuddered. Seamed like a drunkard's cheek and pitted as if with disease, the flaring cliffs that led down to the shunned place below seemed like a row of hideous warders at the gate of hell.

She turned her eyes away with a tremor of fear. The contrast between the frightful gorge and her beautiful, wide vista of a moment ago seemed to her the contrast between life and death, or purity and sin. She felt as if she had been sitting alone at night by her window and an evil, frightfully scarred face had suddenly leered in on her. Her exaltation left her abruptly, while her sense of imagery remained. She began to see this town of Magnet as she had seen her two views—a place of vivid contrasts, of horrors and beauties, of boundless generosity and hot-

blooded crime, of abrupt changes from right living to wrong living, where strong men grew stronger and weak men weaker, and, above all, where he who would live happily must keep himself quite sane and pure of heart.

But among all these things Alva could see no danger for herself. She knew her nature and her purpose to be sufficiently sane. There was no danger that she would obtain a jot more than was her due. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Some one man to pay with his life for Donald's. And she would find him—if not in Magnet then elsewhere. Meanwhile, she thanked God that the righteousness of her purpose would keep her sane.

All things considered, she felt that she had been very successful since she had come to Magnet. Only two weeks had passed and she already knew the name of every man who had been in the camp in February and who might know how Donald had met his end. Three men, in particular, she felt might have something to tell her. One of these was a sharp-faced young miner named Duncan, who seemed in some uncanny way to read her thoughts whenever she spoke to him. Without having mentioned Donald's name to him, she felt,

nevertheless, that he had divined the reason for her presence in the camp, and until she could test him to her own satisfaction, she was wary of trying for the knowledge which he often seemed on the point of imparting.

Another of the three was a product of the saloons—Danny the Bum—half-witted, bleary-eyed, unshaven, unbelievably dirty and forlorn, whose mental fumblings produced a strange mixture of useless fact and fancy concerning Donald, which always began and ended with a vivid recital of his generosity. But just what form this trait had taken Alva could never ascertain. Try as she would, she could extract nothing further from the ill-starred but cautious Danny than that Donald, true to his nature, had been reckless with his nights.

The third of her possibilities was Richard Randall.

Alva wondered how the man had come to acquire Donald's claim. She knew enough about such things now to see the great value of the ground, and yet the transfer of this particular property was decidedly vague. But because she must have a clew, she must disregard nothing, and she soon decided again, as she had decided many times before, to ask him about

it. At first this seemed an easy thing to do, for she had never forgotten the sudden glimpse of his nature that the man had given her when the sale of his property had seemingly hung in the balance. She even liked to repeat what he had said: "Perhaps they'd like it if we'd let them sleep."

But after all, was that everything he had said? Hadn't he also said: "I have another purpose for this ground?" When she coupled this sentence with the sudden disbelief that he would refuse a good price simply because of a grave, she began to feel disturbed. Poetical ideas, she knew, had scant circulation in Magnet. She began to suspect that she had invested her Samaritan with altogether too much of the romantic. And so, once started on this moody road, she proceeded to go farther, and in due time had stripped him mercilessly of one charitable motive after another, until the ugly question again came up as to how he had known her name on that first day.

Right there she decided finally and absolutely, as she had already decided a corresponding number of times the other way, to ask him nothing. While there might be a multitude of ways in which he could have learned it, yet the

damning fact remained that he had lied about it, and the restraint that sprang from this was sufficient to keep them apart on the subject. Yes, and if she could manage it, on other subjects, too.

But there were still some things which puzzled her, and she went into her kitchen, where the gray-haired old woman sat on the doorstep peeling potatoes.

"Sarah," said Alva pleasantly, "tell me who sent you here to work for me."

"Dick Randall, of course," Sarah answered promptly. "He made me cut out the booze, too," she added cheerily. "'Sarah,' says he, 'your pretty daughter, Rosie, in Bullfrog, was a-askin' fer you, Sarah—and I told her she had a good old ma who'd be back home soon with a big stake to help make clothes for the baby.' And *say!* You oughter see me give them saloon men the laugh *then!* Babies always *did* beat whisky, anyhow."

"Sarah," said Alva again, after a thoughtful moment, "don't you think that fifteen dollars a month is very little to pay for leasing this lot from the Town-site Company?"

"*Town-site!*" echoed Sarah, in genuine amazement. "Why, this lot ain't the Town-

site's! Whoever told you that? This lot belongs to Dick Randall! Fifteen dollars a month! I should say that *was* cheap!"

"I thought so, too," said Alva quickly. "Please say nothing about it."

There seemed to be little need to probe farther into the ease of her establishment in Magnet. Even the question as to why the water man sold her on time instead of for cash was fully answered. A faint color rose in Alva's creamy cheek. Then her attention was called to a woman who was idly looking in at the door, with a curious, ruminating expression on her face.

This woman, whom Alva had never seen before, was both tall and conspicuously well figured. Her face was strong rather than weak, although the generous mouth was cynically curled at the corners, and her large, washed-out blue eyes seemed to hold a mingling of yearning and resentment as they appreciated the well-kept interior. Her head uncovered, was a mass of blowsy, not unattractive red hair. She seemed to be still in her twenties.

As the woman's eyes rose to hers with languid insolence, Alva felt every muscle in her body tighten.

"Hullo," said the woman, regarding her with interest. "I was just passing by. Thought I'd look in."

Alva knew what was meant. "I have heard about you and I'm here to see what you are," was what the red-haired woman might as well have said. Alva inclined her head and felt that she was being looked over. Presently it seemed as if there was something more than decent curiosity in the woman's face. Alva blazed with anger. Her eyes grew larger and her eyebrows level, as was their way. Her face flushed in spite of herself.

"Well—you're surely a good-looking woman," the other said bluntly, and the bold eyes wavered as if she felt the contrast between Alva's satiny skin and her own coarsely marked, though handsome, face. "I guess you're a good woman, too. It's handy to know who is and who isn't in this hell hole," she laughed unmirthfully. "Well—so long. Most likely you want to work. Wish you luck. Be sure you make the d——d rats pay their way." And with this venomous advice she turned away, picking a path between the bushes and heaps of glittering bottles toward the lower purlieus of the town.

Alva dropped a sidelong glance and saw old Sarah staring after the stranger with her lips parted in a snarl.

"And to think that she spoke up to the likes of *you!*" the old woman gritted savagely. "I'd like to tear her eyes out! But it'll wait, I guess. She'll get hers—some day. Old Mister Barleycorn will ketch her soon. Those piano-playing, singing women get nutty streaks on the men the same as you and me, and when they can't get the one they want, they go to drinking. It's the talk round town that this one—'Tiger Lil'—is gone clean daffy over Dick—— Oh, my! There you've gone and shook your tea canister all over my nice, clean floor! Well, never you mind one bit, Miss Alva. You let me sweep it up."

CHAPTER V

MAY had come and gone, taking with it what few sweet odors of spring had struggled unequally for life in the valley, and brazen summer refracted hotly from the hills and blazed down from every flaming butte.

All through the long day the mountains had been gauzy with a haze of heat, and as Alva came homeward from Mrs. Baker's in the early evening, the star-shot night was still, even of the ever-whirring wind.

From where she walked in the safe center of the street, she could see Magnet, with its lamps lighted, leap feverishly into its course as a roaring, flaring "boom" camp. All around her in the warm darkness were voices and laughter, carried through the thin, still air as over water—a sense of constant movement—a ceaseless ripple of pianos—grotesque shadows passing and repassing on the walls of the glow-worm tents—the whir and clatter of the roulette ball in the shouting saloons.

Spring and "the ore" had brought prosper-

ity to town. Automobiles without number, from the older camps of Tonopah, Goldfield, Manhattan, and Rhyolite, stood in front of the stores, their engines throbbing, their headlights cutting long paths down the dark street. An odor of good cigars was abroad. Eastern voices talked incisively of "options," "groups," and "sulphides." Stout, ruddy-faced men with well-trimmed white mustaches were pointed out to unshaven ones in prospecting boots; whereupon the boots sauntered with well-feigned casualness in the direction indicated. Now and then a roisterer on the outskirts emptied his revolver at the stars.

Magnet was "on the boom," and Magnet, rioting along with all the arrogance of new-made fortunes, was well aware of it; wherefore the night must be a time for fun too long postponed. And so, through all the action and full-blooded life of the moment, a sense of jocularity was everywhere round about, and heard above it all by each eager ear was the whirl of the wings of Chance.

Unmolested in her quiet passage of the street, Alva paused in her doorway and looked back. Never before had she felt so completely outside of all these people's lives. Something

perilously like bitterness rose to her lips at the contrast between her purpose and the frankly pursued ends of those around her. She suddenly longed to be at one with Magnet, for all its fantastic promises and lurid ambitions. At least, its ideals were healthy, even if their probable attainment might be questioned.

She raised her arms above her head with a thrill of yearning for action and a part in the bright game, if only as an outlet for her abounding vitality. The chrysalis was breaking at last. Never a day came in this wide land but the sun shone mightily and the wind blew. And as it streamed to her through the fingers of the hazy peaks, keen and dry and tangled with the scent of far-off worlds, it seemed searching out the lifeless things of memory to blow them away with the dried leaves of yesterday.

She thought of Natalie, who was now in Italy—Mr. Baghy had forwarded her last letter from Ravenna—and she wondered what the Warrens, especially the easy-going, matter-of-fact Jim, who always let things “work themselves out,” would say if they knew the strange life she was leading to-day. She had told only a very few people that she was going to Cali-

fornia, and only Nannie Ferguson and Mr. Bagby had her postoffice address, so that at the most her old circle would think she was at Pasadena or San Diego. People were asking about her, however, for the fact of her inheritance had been paragraphed in a society journal of which she had a copy, and her name had already been linked tentatively with several men of her old set who were indubitably in need of money.

The article itself was only a hint of the sumptuous life in the East that she was confidently expected to enter upon without delay, but it was enough to bring it all vividly back, and she began to wonder a little why she no longer hungered for those luxuries which her wealth and position could now give. She realized that, a few years before, if she had not been in love with Donald, she would unquestionably have accepted the life and its men as representing all she mundanely desired; but when she considered it all to-day, she felt that, while she would frankly welcome the feminine side of that soft existence, she would probably find the masculine part of it strangely dissatisfying.

At first she very naturally laid this at the door of her age, for she was now twenty-seven, but gradually it was borne in on her that Magnet had wakened her to a new and truer conception of life, and that her unconscious demand for fiber in the masculine was at least one result of the desert's teaching. Putting aside for a moment the sad tangle of ideas so persistently connecting Richard Randall and Donald, she delighted in imagining circumstances under which such women as Natalie and Sally Lowe might meet her tall Samaritan. She fancifully placed the desert man in situations where only inherent grace of mind could preserve him from feminine damnation, and smiled to see him emerge from the ordeal faintly amused and wholly unscarred. And again she saw his quiet eyes, with their wealth of reserve power, resting calmly on some able, keen-sensed gentlemen she knew, only to feel a glow of confidence in his thorough understanding of men, whoever they might be. It was undeniable, of course, that the man's source and his unfamiliarity with the lighter things that would always be part of her woman's life were definite quantities, but these had not been

included in Alva's estimate for some time past. Life in Magnet had shown her the greater value of certain fundamentals.

But she was very lonely to-night, and her thoughts eventually turned on herself and the ever-present problem. She began to speculate again as to the matter of Donald's claim. Although he had never alluded to it at length in his letters, except to speak of its great value, it occurred to her that she might find a clew somewhere in the packet hidden away among the few possessions she had brought, and on her way through the dining tent she paused to light a lamp, so that she could bring the letters there to read. When she returned, a familiar figure was standing, hat in hand, in the doorway. Without knowing why, she hid the letters in her dress.

"Magnet might be called a little noisy to-night," he said, as he came forward at her welcoming smile to where they had sat many times before with her oil-clothed table between them. "A lot of claims have changed hands lately. Some of the boys are cutting up. I hope no one is bothering you."

"No. You're the first to-night," and her touch of fun found a reflection in his own swift

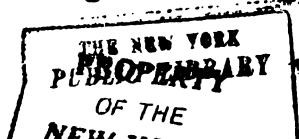
smile. "If you stay too late, I'll notify 'the committee.' But how does a man get a claim, in the first place?" she added carelessly. "You were going to tell me all about it the other evening and something interrupted."

She moved the lamp to one side and seemed to have trouble with the wick. Meanwhile, womanlike, she managed a complete appraisal of his appearance. She found him cleanly shaven as always, simply dressed, well poised, and with a steady, friendly light in his luminous eyes. A recollection of the woman at the kitchen doorway came into her mind, but was as quickly put away.

"He finds a ledge—and locates it," he answered. "That means building a discovery monument on the outcrop and putting other monuments at the corners of the claim. His development work must be done inside of three months from that date. Then the ground is his for a year from the following January. After that he has to do regular assessment work each year in order to keep his title."

"It seems very simple," Alva remarked. "Why is it that they so often have trouble?"

"Sometimes men think that others have committed illegal acts in locating," was the re-



sponse. "Location depends on a man's word. Generally it's respected. But there are some who take advantage of that fact. Nearly always they get caught. I have met one or two like that."

"Did you have trouble?"

"It could be called that," he admitted evasively. "But trouble always depends on the *men*." His eyes strayed away. He seemed about to speak of something else.

But there was something yet for Alva to know. She turned again to her friend, the lampwick, and moved it up and down. Meanwhile, she asked her question:

"What happens to a man's claim if he—if he goes away—and doesn't come back—that is, in time to do his location work?"

The hand on the table before her beat a faint tattoo before the answer came.

"In that case it reverts to the government and can be relocated."

"*When?*" asked Alva sharply.

"At the end of the ninety days," he smiled.

"But might not others relocate it before then—if they were very anxious for it and knew that the man might never come back?"

"It would be wrong," he said evenly. "No one would uphold them in it."

Alva was puzzled. Could it be that Donald had not done even the first simple work necessary to holding a claim? Yet how could the man across the table have secured it in any other way?

"Generally a man does his location work as soon as he finds his ledge, but, of course, there are exceptions to all rules," he said, in a curiously level voice. Then he raised his eyes to hers with an amused smile. "Why not locate a claim for yourself and see how it's done? There's some good ground not yet taken up along the cliff that looks down into the valley. I've been thinking"—and his strong, quiet eyes looked hopefully into hers—"that perhaps we might walk out that way to-morrow afternoon. You'll not find many things like the Valley back East. It's only a mile from here. Is that too far?" he asked, with some concern.

"Too far?" cried Alva, laughing at the ridiculous challenge. "Do you think, sir, I must *always* have your horse to ride?"

With this answer he apparently considered the object of his visit accomplished, for he rose and held out his hand.

"You *could* have him," he said, with a curious little nod. "He hasn't seemed quite the same ever since that first night. I declare, I just don't *know* what's got into him lately. It must be loco weed. He won't have anything to do with the other horses in the corral nowadays. He seems all stuck up!"

"And so you want to give him away—to me!"

"If you like his gait. You must look him over first. But I'll be here to-morrow when I come off shift." He lifted his hat and was out of sight almost at once in the darkness.

"What a silly thing to say about a *horse*!" Alva murmured. And then, as she stood in her doorway trying to recognize a disappearing figure as his, she felt the blood steal warmly into her cheek. He had not been speaking of his horse.

Her hand brushed against the packet of letters in her skirt and she clutched them with all her strength. There must be nothing of *that* kind—unless—unless it were she who brought it about for her own purposes. Her brow darkened. By what curious process had this man obtained title to Donald's claim? By

what right, legal or moral, had he assumed possession of this precious property that was still lawfully Donald's—aye—and hers, too.

"Good evening, Miss Leigh," said a voice beside her. Duncan, the young miner from the Cactus shaft, stepped into the beam of light and bowed in his rather pleasant way. "Seeing you were having callers, I figured I'd step over."

Once more Alva saw the look in the young man's eyes that seemed to show an insight into her affairs. At other times this had been disturbing, but to-night she decided to make use of his knowledge. Yet she did not ask him in, but showed him, instead, a seat beside her on the doorstep, where the light shining from behind kept her face in the shadow.

"Everyone here seems to be making money nowadays," she said. "Are you selling claims, too?"

"I only wish I was," came the immediate answer and an equally quick look that was not hard for her to interpret. "There are reasons why I'd like to get my hooks on a few thousands right now. But I've got no claims. Got done out of 'em," he added bitterly.

"There was a lot of midnight locating done here a while back, as you may know. But I'll get square, some day."

"You know who did it, of course," said Alva. "If you were in the right, why couldn't you make them give it up?"

"I guess you don't rightly understand, Miss Leigh," Duncan answered sourly. "In all these places there's *rings*. If a poor man doesn't get into the ring at the start, he stands no show. When there's two or three big men and mebbe some guns to back up a jumper when he knocks over your monument, what are you going to do? Suppose, now, that I come into this yere camp when it's only a pup, and I see a likely-looking fraction stuck away somewhere in a good group. Suppose their owners are the men that run the camp—not mine operators, you understand, but miners, these yere presidents and secretaries and officers of the Federation. What chance have I got against *them*? Do you reckon I kin hold that ground if it isn't recorded and surveyed? No, ma'am! Not in a thousand years! They ain't yere for their health, you bet! A little bit of a mistake in a date or a description is good enough for them. Over she goes!

Kick down the monument! Tear up the notice! Pull out the guns! *Then* where are you?"

Alva sat still, listening intently to every word. If she had not been so completely absorbed in fitting the puzzle together with the aid of this new evidence, she might have felt the man's mind working on hers with almost uncanny perceptiveness.

"I'll show you what I mean," he said, with a ring of sincerity in his voice. "Then you'll know more about some of these fellows. 'Way last fall, a man comes into this yere camp. I ain't saying how old he was, or his name. I ain't the kind that looks for trouble. But, anyway, he was in the first rush, and he took up a lot of claims. Some were here and some were there, and one was a fraction on the best piece of outcrop in camp. Now, if all those claims had been in the same group, he could have done enough work on one of them to hold the whole lot. But they were scattered. He had to pick away, first on one and then on another.

"Now, while he was doing his holding work one week on a 'way-off claim, a man who owned all around this fraction looked over the young

fellow's paper and saw that the young fellow had located the same day *he* did. So what does this man do? He changes his own date to *one day earlier*, and then he pivots his claims on his discovery monuments so as to cover up the fraction. And he puts up his permanent corners and side-centers, and gets it surveyed and recorded. And he crowds that young fellow out and says there ain't any fraction, and never *was*.

"Now, what can the boy do? There's a Local to appeal to—yes—but the other man's high up in it. In fact, he's about at the top. Mebbe you'd call him *at* the top. Yes. Let it go that way. And so the boy gets laughed at and he feels mean. But he has good stuff in him. He's a fighter. He won't let anyone beat him on a little technicality, and he won't quit. Only, he makes one mistake."

"What was that?" asked Alva sharply.

"Why—er—he goes to packing a gun. Now, that's foolish. I carry one myself, sometimes—but I don't make threats. So they know he's got the gun, and that he's picking up evidence against them. Things begin to look bad. They have to make a move. So

this is what they do: They send a man out after that young fellow, and they get him to drinking, and they put knock-out drops in his glass. And then another Mr. Friend, who's all ready near by, gets him out into the brush —'to get over it'—and leaves him there. In the morning, what do they find? They find that poor, innocent, hard-working, nice young fellow, that never hurt anybody or anything, lying there with no money in his pockets—*shot with his own gun!*"

Duncan halted abruptly, almost dramatically. Then he laughed. "But that's the way it goes. *Simple*, ain't it?"

"*Very* simple," Alva answered dully. "What did they do about it?"

"*Do!* With Mr. Date Changer sitting in the Local office all night long with his pals so as to furnish an alibi? What *could* they do? They buried the poor, innocent young fellow—that's all. I—er—I helped 'em do it.

"I tell you what, Miss Leigh," the man continued venomously. "You don't know—you never *could* know—the kinds of men there is in this camp. Goody-goody-looking men that are so crooked they couldn't sleep in a round-house. Men that look you straight between

the eyes and make you think they're sending money home to their mothers, when all the time they're figuring out some way to do you up and make it look as if—as if the desert beat you!"

As if the desert had beaten him! A month ago the phrase would have been meaningless, but to-night she knew to the uttermost what it meant. Alva had felt for some time that the very lack of a clew pointed to brains in the crime's engineering. Now the light was beginning to break.

"But I don't like to talk," the man continued shrewdly. "I don't ever say much. I might get misunderstood. Danny the Bum, *he* knows. He's up all night, knocking round. As for me—I've got to sleep, so's I kin make my wages. And I've got a good stake saved up, too. It won't be long now before I pull out for Idyho. *That's* the country you ought to see, Miss Leigh. All hills and woods and green valleys high up with grass and streams a-running everywhere. That's the place fer a young couple like you and me to live. Mebbe you'd like to—"

"I'm very tired to-night, Mr. Duncan," Alva interrupted. "If you don't mind, I'll say

good night. Perhaps—if you happen to see Danny to-morrow—you might tell him that I've some work he can do."

Chagrined by his abrupt dismissal, the man stood by in silence while she passed in and closed the door. He was a hard bitten, shrewd young man for all his mask of sincerity and he had laid some ingenious plans as to the future of Alva Leigh. He had not meant to speak to-night but something in her despondency had lured him on and now all his careful schemes had fallen to pieces. He had made his "play" and lost.

For a time he stood there in the darkness, meditating, and then moved away, passing silently between the tents to the virginal greasewood behind them, where a path led him to an isolated tent-house near the vague bulk of the lumber yard.

There was a light in the house, shining out of the open door, and on the doorstep sat a woman with red hair and a white dress. As the man came into the light, she recognized him and spoke; whereupon he stepped out of the light again and seated himself near by.

"I've just come from there, Lil," he said, as if he knew why she was sitting there alone,

thinking. "And you can bet on it—you've got no show."

An angry exclamation leaped to the woman's lips at the brutality, but she choked it off and laughed.

"Neither have you," she retorted. "We're two of a kind, you and I, and we're certainly beauts."

"I can't see it," he objected. "I'd be all right for her, I reckon, if I had a stake. You can marry *any* woman if you have enough money, and you don't need much to start with if you're a good liar. How about a couple of ten-spots, Lillian? Can you spare it? I'm cut right off at the pockets to-night—just when I've spotted a brace of Easterners that I could work into a little game of stud. Come through, and help a fellow out."

The woman narrowed her eyes. "What do you know?" she asked, as if she would bargain a while.

"I know this much," he answered: "Either she thinks Randall shot young Jaffray for his claim, or else I'm the worst-fooled man in ten counties. And you can bet I piled it in."

"You did?" the woman murmured thoughtfully. "Did you mention names?"

"Not me. It's better not. But it hit her hard—and stuck. I saw through her little game a month or more ago. I wonder what she thinks she can do."

"Sometimes those women can do a good deal," was the sober answer. "Even when there's very little evidence. People believe them, you see."

He looked at her sideways for a moment, meditating some new viciousness.

"Would you have him just the same if it *was* true?" he asked.

The red-haired woman made a disgusted movement that showed her fiery temper. She had to grip her hands together to keep from striking him. Her throat filled up and choked her utterance.

"I'd take Dick Randall quick as a wink if he'd shot the whole lot of you for your claims," she said thickly. "He's more than you'll ever be. *He's a man!*"

"Then you'll have your chance," was the acid reply. "He did it—and there isn't a man in camp that knows it but me. I've got him any time I want him."

For a moment the woman said nothing, but only stared into the darkness, where she had

heard footsteps. Then, as she felt him dangerously near her, she sprang to her feet.

"*None of that!*" she cried, as she tried to reach the house. "Don't think you can hold *me* up! Oh, I guess I know who's doing the strong-arm work around here now, and I guess I know who shot Don Jaffray, too. There'll be more that know it by to-morrow. And don't you try to tell me anything about Dick Randall. If you had anything on him, you'd have bled him to death months ago, or *you'd* be dead. *Let me in that door!*"

For answer, the man only advanced on her silently, driving her ahead of him into the greasewood and away from the house. In his hand he held a glittering object gripped like a club.

"Give me that money," he said, in a low voice, and glanced over his shoulder at an indistinct figure that seemed to be approaching. "Tell them, if you want—and spoil your own game. I didn't think you were such a fool."

The red-haired woman stood still for a moment as if she saw the truth of his remark, and then suddenly laughed in his face.

"Why, hello, Dick!" she cried, in a strident voice that rang out across the open spaces to

at least one of the tents on Main Street.

"Here he is behind you, right now."

With an oath, Duncan whirled about and saw—Danny the Bum. The woman laughed mockingly and slipped by into the house.

Snarling with rage, Duncan drew back his fist and planted it squarely in the gray-bearded, vacuous face.

A few yards away and the miner turned, as if struck by a sudden thought, and looked back. The woman had left the protecting doorway, and was helping a staggering form into the house.

"That was a fool trick," Duncan muttered. "That old dope can make a lot of trouble for me. Well—I guess I'll play the game through to-night—then quit. My luck's played out."

Halfway up the main street, where a cross-road came in from the Magnet Consolidated's shaft a mile away, two large acetylene lights emblazoned the dubious name "Red Onion" on a high-fronted, frame saloon. Here Duncan circulated slowly through the pay-night crowds, and carefully spoke to all the men he knew. One or two offered him drinks, but he shook his head. He wasn't feeling just

right, he said, to all those who could hear him, and was going home to bed. Another circuitous voyage through the smoke-hazed bedlam, and he noticed with satisfaction that comparatively few of the Consolidated's men had come over the dark trail from their isolated workings. Behind the bar a nicked clock told him that it was only eight-thirty. His thin lips came together in a line as he made his grim calculations. If he hurried a little, he could get to the point of rocks on the Consolidated's trail at just about the right time.

With a cautious glance around to see if he were noticed, he stepped quickly out of the back door of the saloon, and struck out through the brush at a rapid walk. But as he went, a shambling figure, which had been wandering around in the darkness outside the saloon, recognized him, and saw where he was going. Presently, after some obvious skull gropings, it decided to follow.

It was about this same time of the evening that a boy came and stood on a chair in the Miners' Hall across from the Red Onion, and lighted a flaring kerosene lamp which dangled from a cross beam. This done, he lingered on the steps until a dozen grave-faced men ar-

rived and shut the door on their deliberations, which were on certain hold-ups that were being committed almost nightly in the camp and the line of action which should be taken.

And it was about this same time, also, that a woman took a pen and laboriously printed a few lines on a sheet of pink note paper, whose envelope she took pains to address in the same cautious way.

And yet another woman, alone in her tent, sat among a handful of letters strewn across her bed, alternately puzzling over a man's name which had rung out just now on the clear night air, and repeating certain phrases over and over again under her breath:

"Found shot." "With his own gun."
"As if the desert had beaten him."

Only an *able* man would have thought of that.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN old Sarah called to her a little after four the next afternoon, Alva turned away from the tiny mirror swaying against the frame of her tent, with a greater certainty of herself and what she purposed to do than had been hers at any time since she had come to Magnet. She knew perfectly well that she could never hope to trap a man like Richard Randall into damaging confessions, but her instinct told her that to-day he was ready to be led into a disclosure of his true character, whatever that might prove to be.

And so it was a bright-faced, apparently interested woman who strode untiringly with him up the sage-sweet slopes behind the town, and entered into his mood with a careful sympathy that started a warm flow of words.

"I've wanted you to see the Valley many a time since you came," he said, and immediately the strong appeal of his tones was upon her, in spite of her determination not to feel it. "To me, this is the solemnest place in all the

world—because it's so silent." They had nearly reached the summit of the Funerals, and already a ribbony line of snow, miles away through the thin air, had come into view on the other side of a great gap that was yet unseen. "Even if a fellow could concentrate silences the same as you concentrate sulphides on a Wilfley table, I reckon these Death Valley silences would still outrun your product about a thousand ounces to the ton."

Then they gained the summit of the range, and Alva put out her hand to stay his words. She saw now why he had called it "solemn," and she saw the reason for its name, for the presage of death lay in every stark detail.

Beneath their feet a great cliff of burnt sienna fell, sheer, a thousand feet. Below this, bright terraces of hillocks tumbled down two thousand more into rocky gorges, and gray beds of sand, which wound, snakelike, between hills, snow-white and orange and blood-red, down to a yellow, heat-hazed plain. Scorified like the crimson hulk of a dead crater, the ghastly gorges and hummocks cut and rolled their way north and south until they faded into vague blurs of color in the smoky distance. Directly across the great gap, the

bleak front of the Panamints, capped with snow, rose like a sinister prison wall. And always between them lay that glittering, twinkling, white-powdered, yellow plain—lifeless, hot, and still—attracting with the fascination of unfathomed peril, and yet as repelling as a skull grinning through a shroud.

The woman groped behind her and sank down on a jutting table of rock. It all seemed a perfectly fitting climax to the premonitory wastes behind them. Just as there are parts of this earth that promise life and happiness at first sight, so this place, too, had its declaration, but the silent warning that came up to her from the great sink below was that of death and despair. Nothing could palliate its sterility—nothing in all that riot of color north and south or in the bleak, stony west held out the faintest hope of a habitable region beyond. Hemmed in by the two great mountain chains, the hideous basin, with its gleaming floor, seemed like a great smelting pot beneath whose treacherous golden dross a hell of molten metal bubbled, yet seemed still.

And over it all was the constant sense of heat—overpowering and unescapable—refracting upon her from every angle of the hot

rocks, shooting up from the still hotter gorges and burnt hillocks, reflecting from the glittering miles of salt and borax spread out ilimitably below. Even on the high edge of the cliff, the air felt dry and lifeless. What must it be down there where the yellow surface rocked with gentle undulations as the bluish gauze of the heat waves swam up and down?

Alva turned a strained look on the man beside her. She felt frightened.

He smiled understandingly, and nodded.

"It's pretty bad," he said. "Next month it will be the worst of all. Even now it would be hard work to stay alive down there very long—where even flies can't live. But men have had to do it. Some Mormons tried it a good many years ago, and they had a hard time. They'd sold out their Utah ranches and were traveling west over the old California trail, and the party split here in the Funerals through a disagreement over an Indian guide who knew about the valley, and wouldn't tackle it.

"So half of them went down the Amargosa Valley, and on through the Soda Lake Sink country, which is nearly as bad, and so on through to what is now Los Angeles.

"The other half of the party cut across the desert behind us to this place, crossing a few miles up there to the north. When they reached the other side, they found they couldn't get up through the Panamints, and they had to stop."

He pointed across the sink, with its winding rivers of salt mush and borax, to where a small clump of willows and mesquite dotted a fanlike arroyo bed at the foot of the western wall. "Do you see that tiny green spot? That's a spring they opened up, just by luck. Nowadays men call it 'Bennett's Wells.' It was the only thing that saved them.

"There they rested for a while, and counted noses. Some had dropped behind—for keeps. Then they tried to get out, going north—all along that western side—hunting for a gulch where they could get their wagons up. But they didn't find it. And always some fellow got enough of it after a while, and dropped where he stood. Because, you see—it isn't lack of water in the canteen that makes the trouble so much as it is the lack of water in the air. Up here, there's forty or fifty per cent., we'll say—down there,

there's only ten, or maybe *five*. It isn't thirst that kills in Death Valley. It's letting your head get too hot.

"Well—then—they came back—back to Bennett's Wells, and after they'd rested, they began to figure on the south. They were an uncomplaining lot, those old Mormons, and pretty grim. Down south they did better, but their animals were getting weak, and it wouldn't do for them to pull a pound more than was absolutely necessary. So they figured that they'd better leave all their money behind—buried somewhere—two hundred thousand dollars in gold. And three picked men went out and buried it over there on the slope south of the Wells. Then they went on. There had been about forty of them at first. Now there were a lot less.

"But it was hard work to get along, and when, just by luck, they stumbled on a spring, they were pretty thirsty. Now this spring had poisoned water—they called it 'Bitter Spring.' All of that party—all of those men who had left the original outfit here in the Funerals curled up and died alongside of that spring, including the men that had buried the

treasure. Just three out of the lot escaped, and they left in a hurry—on foot, because all the animals were dead, too.

“Now, here is the point of the story. While those three men were climbing up the Panamints, trying to get out, they came across an outcrop of silver ore—native silver—with the values sticking out in wires and knobs. In fact, it was so easy to knock the silver out of the rock that they pounded some out and made new sights for their rifles. And they called it the ‘Gun Sight Mine,’ and went on. A long time afterward they turned up at the old Newhall Ranch over there in the San Fernando Valley, and were saved. When they told their story, they started a search for the Gun Sight Mine that’s been going on for more than *fifty years!*”

“And it has never been found?”

“Not yet,” he smiled. “It’s probably covered up with ‘wash’ from the rains. But we have hopes because the rains will *uncover* it some day. I have a man over there right now, looking around. Perhaps he’ll find it and send me word—perhaps he won’t. But if he *did* send me word—” He paused and

Alva saw the pleasant lips tighten ever so little and the fine eyes contract.

"You would go across—even now?" she ventured, with a swift look at the yellow sink below.

"Even now," he answered. "It can be done. And it would *have* to be done," he added, a trifle grimly. "News of the finding of the Gun Sight would bring a hundred men there overnight. I would go by the causeway over the borax marsh at Furnace Creek up there to the north—then south by Bennett's Wells."

"But the *water*!" she cried, almost frantically. "Where would you get it?"

"I could make the Wells on two canteens," was his reply.

He stretched himself at her feet, his back against the ledge of rock, his felt hat in his lap, and his eyes, thoughtful and steady, fixed on the darkening mountain chain from among whose snow-tipped peaks some day might come a message. There was no denying the certainty with which he estimated his ability, but the sense was equally strong that he was right—that he *could* reach the Wells on two canteens.

Alva shifted her position so as to study his face. Whatever grim means he might use to accomplish his purposes the man's general aims in life were unquestionably sane. For the first time since she had known him, she began to understand his ambitions, even though it was quite possible that they had forever ended her own. She saw, for one thing, just why he was satisfied to stay in Magnet and work as a laborer. Back in the East, men in like pursuits stayed in the rut because timidity or misfortune closed their eyes to their chances, but here was a man who, while he worked, was in constant activity, keeping prospectors in the field, sending his earnings to recently discovered camps, continually testing, digging, exploring, unceasingly yet silently pursuing the end that he knew he would, in time, accomplish.

And so, in spite of the gall-like bitterness of her suspicions, her honesty compelled her to acknowledge his grip on the possibilities contained in himself and in this wide Western world in which he lived. He had begun to typify that larger life that she was coming to know. And this life, which had seemed at first an existence devoted merely to taking reckless

chances was, in reality, she was beginning to see, a logical and never-ceasing search for the success that could be found somewhere in these hot hills because, of a certainty, it lay there waiting to be found.

Little by little Alva's mind wandered away from her main purpose. He had begun to talk, quietly and very simply and, as far as she could detect, without a trace of anything but sober honesty in his tones. Alva's intended study changed into silent absorption.

"It's always *there*—if you'll only look far enough and long enough," he said, unconsciously following her thoughts. "That's the thing that has kept me going. The way to find a mine is to look for it—and the way to keep it good after you've found it is to keep on looking. And I shall be always looking.

"But I have been at it quite a while," he added thoughtfully, and smiled up at her as if still on good terms with chance. "I started mining when I was twelve years old, nipping tools over in Grass Valley, and I've been prospecting and mining ever since. Naturally, I haven't been able to bother a college much during that time. Would that spoil a man for you?"

"No," said Alva understandingly.

He nodded. "I've met some who would figure on it a whole lot, but not *you*, I reckon. As a matter of fact, I have been to a good many schools and colleges in my life, but they were not like those you'd know about. They've been in Nevada and in California, and, for a while, one was in Arizona. You see—I had to start out young. I'm only thirty or so now, but I've had to do everything on a ranch that there was to do in order to keep going, and nearly everything around a mine. My father and my brother had a quick ending down in Arizona, and I was left with some debts to pay."

"You mean—they died in an accident?"

"Well—hardly that, ma'am. It was Mexicans that did it. You see—we were always what might be called a mining family. If there was a rush anywhere near by, one of us would always go. And so, little by little, my brother got down into Arizona and found a ledge and sent for my father.

"But this ledge was near the 'line,' and the fellows over the border were pretty 'bravo.' When they heard we had a good claim, they came over, and tried to take it away from my

father and my brother. It was then that they were killed. I had not yet come down from California. But when I heard about it, I lost no time. There were seven Mexicans that did it. I was just turned eighteen when—when the matter was finally settled.”

Alva’s lips parted suddenly, but she finally let her question go unasked. One boy with a rifle against *seven*! And the seven had “settled”!

“After that I knocked around a good deal—punching and mining and milling—back and forth and crosswise. But, somehow, I was always trying to pick up something as I went along, because I knew that if I made a big stake, I’d want an education mighty bad. And so I studied books when I could, and I listened to people who *knew*, and now I have got so that I’m not afraid to talk with most men. That is to say—I have sometimes got a little information on something that they don’t know about—when they happen to get around to it.”

He paused and looked up at her with an amused smile. “Do you see, now, how the desert makes a fellow want to talk? A woman to tell your story to out here is bet-

ter than a dish of vanilla ice cream down there at the Wells on a hot day."

"Where did you go from Arizona?" Alva asked.

"Utah, for a while—hunting for copper up along the rim of the basin," he answered, dropping his eyes again to the shimmering valley, whose western slopes were beginning to purple. "Then back on the Mother Lode, blanket-slucing tailings that a fellow with a stamp mill didn't know how to save. That gave me a good stake for Thunder Mountain—and British Columbia—and Nome. Sometimes I made a strike and sometimes I lost it. I'd work until I had something saved up, and then it would go into a hole. Generally it stayed there. A few times, perhaps, I could have bought a ranch, but, you see, I was always trying to find something *big*. I can always earn a hundred and fifty dollars a month running hoist, and sometimes two or three times that amount on shaft and tunnel contracts, but I want *more* than that—not because I want the money so much as because I— Well—probably you wouldn't catch my point of view. It would seem too braggish."

His eyelids rose and fell over a quick glance

to see if she would accept his modestly stated hope. "I've been feeling that perhaps I had more in me than just that little bit."

The conviction had come to Alva some time since that he had more in him than even he himself knew, but she said nothing in reply. Restraint still tied her tongue.

"And I have come to the point," he said, and she felt his eyes warm on hers, "where I can see the *difference* in people—I mean, the way *you* see it. When I was a boy, people were pretty much all alike, only some were good and some were downright bad. *Women* were *different*. *They* were *all* good—and it took quite a while to show me that perhaps I had made a little mistake there. And then, too, I couldn't notice anything about Eastern folks—except the funny way they talked and their clothes, and *that* took quite a while.

"But I'm getting to know where I stand, now. And I'm feeling better because I can find the pay streak in people even when it's covered up pretty deep with wash." He opened out his hand in the familiar gesture. "You see—I'm glad of all that, because some day I'll use it where it ought to be used. It won't be long now before I make a strike. I'm

getting good reports 'most every week. *Then*, perhaps, I'll be a little more than I am to-day."

"And then?" asked Alva, because she could not help herself.

"And then I shall ask a certain woman if she will marry me," he answered gravely. "Perhaps even before then—if she understands that I mean always to do right, and will not make her suffer through whisky. But she need not worry.

"Did you ever hear of a man falling in love with a *picture*?" he asked abruptly, with a boldness that might have been used to cover trepidation. "Would that seem like a boy's trick to you? I know of a man who did that once—a man a good deal like myself. You see—it happened this way: Wherever this fellow went around through the country, he would always look around him at the women in the cities or towns where he worked. And the longer he looked, the more he thought that a good many of them didn't seem to be acting quite right about things. He didn't know just what was wrong—whether it was the way they regarded their homes or their husbands or the terrible baby difficulty, only it seemed as

if they weren't quite holding up their end of the game.

"Now, a man has got to have standards or he doesn't amount to much. If he hasn't got a good old mother or father to give him a little family pride to come and go on, he has to manufacture something to take its place. So generally he makes up a code of some kind, even if it's only 'no drinks before breakfast,' and he sticks to that. But the women that this fellow met didn't seem to have any codes or standards or any foolish things like that. They were like a lot of pretty, sassy kids whose husbands were only made to walk on. It was just whatever they could get away with that they did.

"And so this fellow got pretty disgusted. He said, 'I have got my ideas about this thing, and if there isn't any woman around that's a great deal better than *I* am, I'll go to work and manufacture a woman in my mind that will do for me until I find one.' And so he fixed one up from a picture he once saw, with dark eyes—like yours, I reckon—and dark hair, too. And he gave her a fine, strong body and a mind without any—er—crooked

streaks in it. And he made her loyal and brave—”

Alva smiled. Honesty was making the old, old dream both fresh and poignant.

“Doesn’t nearly every man do just that? Isn’t she what you call your ‘ideal woman’?”

“Perhaps,” he conceded, so thoughtfully that she saw he had never been conscious of it before. “But this fellow went a little farther than that. He made her better than himself. He made her think big, noble things. He didn’t want her sticking around down where *he* was. He wanted her always just a little ahead of him, so that he could keep on working. Would you have any other kind?”

“N-no,” said Alva, startled. “But he was a very unusual sort of man to want her to be better than himself.” She wondered if he thought he was deceiving her. “Most men want merely a partner.”

In spite of all she could do, a curious question flashed through her mind: *What had Donald wanted her to be?* Her thoughts raced back over the years in an attempt to recollect some hunger for inspiration that would match this one found to-day.

"It seems to me," she said thoughtfully, "that it would be very hard to find a woman for a man who *wanted* to be inspired."

"*But this man found her,*" he objected gently; whereat his theory seemed less whimsical. "And she was all the things he had figured on. Only—after he'd found her, he became afraid that he wasn't good enough for her, and that made him feel pretty bad. In fact, he used to talk to me about that side of it."

Alva shot a quick glance at him. Was he talking about some other man, after all? Forthwith, she began to formulate traps for him, but gave it up after a few futile attempts. His easy flow of ideas confused her, and made her own mental processes seem slow and stupid. For some curious reason, which ought to have been irritating, she could not grasp the trend of his thoughts, and so was forced to follow obediently wherever he led, losing more of her independence with every word. And in this strange condition of mind, which was more pleasant than she would ever have suspected, she unknowingly took another step.

He was lying back against the rock on which she sat, his eyes sometimes on hers, but more

often lazily surveying the valley through half-closed lids. While his eyes were cast down, her own inventoried him. Again her restless imagination made him a type, but this time it was with a more generous award of keenness and breadth of vision than before. As she followed the simply told stories of his young manhood as they came uncynically, but with accurate weighing, from his lips, she found other stories infinitely more interesting in the sensitive, aquiline nose and cleft chin. He spoke of many rough affairs in which he had been involved, but he did not boast of the clean living that she saw in the clear eyes and skin. Neither did he say he was self-respecting, although she read it as well in his well-kept mustache as in his manner of thought.

So close was she to him there in the solitude, where not even the hum of a fly broke the silence, that a new thrall laid hold of her, and this time it was the sense of his physical attractiveness. Without being conscious of it, what little of masculinity she had built up in herself during the past months faded quickly away before the complete virility that lay at ease an arm's length away. For the first time in years, Alva Leigh became gladly feminine

again, secretly admiring his length and straightness of limb—speculating idly on the strength that must lie in those big brown hands—wondering why he parted his hair on the side where it was thinnest—eagerly waiting for his lips to part so that she might see his white, even teeth—and, most inexplicable of all, smiling, unconsciously, when *he* smiled.

But it was only a moment before, horrified, she realized what had happened and angrily broke off the insidious train of thought. A fierce pang shot through her when she saw how little she had accomplished. And yet, as she dared another look and let the honesty of his words obtain its due, the conviction, warm and fragrant, stole into her welcoming heart that she was attempting an unwarranted task. If there were such a thing as truthfulness in this world, it was surely shining on her now out of this strong man's eyes. If clean-heartedness could sound in a voice, it was to be heard in every deep, steady tone of this man beside her. Once more the memory of his words beside Donald's grave ebbed into the tumult of her emotions, and she forgot the afternoon's grim purpose. With a warm rush of gratitude in which there were some danger-

ous, sweet throbbing things yet undefined, she began to prepare the way for her confession. But before she could speak, he was talking again, and her chance, for a time, was gone.

"Someone to talk to is a godsend out here on the desert," he was saying, with a slow smile, "and I never blamed this fellow for running on so about his womany ideas. In fact, if a man hasn't a little company out here, he gets in a bad way.

"Did you ever hear of the 'desert loco'? Probably it's fairly scarce in New York City, although I've not been there to see. But out here it's a troublesome thing. Whisky brings it mainly, but sometimes it comes to men from having no one to talk to, and nothing to look at except the desert, and nothing to think about except the things they *didn't* do. And so they talk to themselves, which is bad for them, and they go to remembering nicer places where they once lived, and that makes it worse. And after a while they grow quiet and queer and begin to *hate* things, themselves first of all. Only"—and he looked up with a laugh that showed his understanding of the subject's strange psychology—"you'd never know it."

"You mean—they conceal it?" asked Alva, puzzled.

"Just that," he said, with the enthusiasm that always preceded a quick flow of words. "And yet I don't reckon that we desert folks are much different from city people, after all. The *loco* man only lives a little more inside himself than you and I. We all have our own little worlds right in our own heads, and the funny part of it is that every man's world is different from the next fellow's. Of course, we think the world *we* see is the same that everyone else sees—and yet our thoughts make it a different world for everyone of us. Did you ever wonder, for instance, how it would be to look at things with another person's mind. My hat, here, looks gray to me—but it may be *white* to you."

"It *is* white," said Alva positively, then laughed.

"No," he grinned happily. "Not while it's my hat. But you see what I mean. People get *notions*, sometimes about articles like this hat—more often about other people—principally about injuries that they think another person has done them. And they feed on their

notion and twist it around in their minds and chew on it till it gets in pretty bad shape. Finally, they really go *loco* about that one thing—but”—and he smiled again—“you would never know it. They go about their daily work just the same. They seem just the same. They *are* just the same, except for that one little kink in their minds, which they’re smart enough to hide from you—sometimes.

“Take Danny the Bum, for instance. Once Danny had a wife and family, but the whisky beat him. So he cleared out and went prospecting on the desert. A few years of that and Danny began to have notions. Because he let them grow on him, they changed his mind. You might say they *ate* it up. Now, I can’t look inside of Danny’s head today, but I’ll cheerfully bet my share of the Gun Sight Mine that it’s just the queerest, crookedest place you’d ever see—with a lot of little black hates, that never get anywhere, running around like mad inside and killing off everything decent that tries to grow.

“And so we have to keep our heads as level as we can, out here,” he said soberly. “I get notions myself sometimes, but I get rid of them

by talking to other people about them. Don't you?"

"Y-e-e-e-s," she answered slowly—and then, with a deep breath, put her suspicions away, she hoped, forever. "Indeed I do. And I must tell you something right away—"

"Oh, let me say *my* piece first," he interrupted boyishly. "About this—this— Well, now—how can I say it? These foolish *love* ideas that a man *will* have—do you reckon that they could ever be *loco* ideas, too?"

"They, too," she answered solemnly, though her face twitched. "In fact, they can spring up from nothing at all and subsist on less real fact than anything else in the whole wide world."

"Golly!" he muttered, seeming to concede her superior knowledge on the point. "That's surely mean for *him*."

"But you've already said that your friend built up his fancy merely on a picture," she objected pointedly. "You couldn't ask for a better sample of the *loco* than that."

"But he isn't *loco*," he stated calmly. "He's going to get her."

"He only *thinks* so," she retorted. "That's

his *notion*. There may be obstacles that are simply insuperable."

"He would make them disappear," was the answer. "Don't forget that they would seem insuperable only to *her*. Don't you suppose that if he could show her—"

But Alva had risen to her feet and was looking at the watch at her belt with an exclamation of surprise. Their hour—and his—had flown.

And so, presently, they were walking back to Magnet in the early evening, the man amazingly happy in spite of the fact that something had been left unsaid—the woman with her mind swept clean of one ill, but wordless with the strange pangs of another. For each step that took them farther away from the Valley brought Alva farther away from that other dread vale into whose shadows she had been descending until a saner force had caught her up, and she softened to her companion swiftly, her sensitive lips quivering with the confession still unspoken, her hand more friendly when, swinging, it happened to touch his own. Some curious power in him seemed bringing out all that was truly woman in her, and although she tried to fight off its ascendancy, yet something

was always staying her hand, whispering that to-day she had entered on a new life through her Samaritan's guidance, a life that was both sweeter and infinitely more complete. Once she feared, momentarily, that she might have been the subject of his mild dissertation on "notions," but finally saw that it was, of course, impossible and so took heart again.

"It's always daytime longest in the East," he said, as they paused on the last hummock that sloped down to the town, and he pointed to the glowing hills. "Night comes first where the sun goes down, and you think the day is gone. But look back the other way and you'll see them saving up a little sunlight for you right at the end—to go on until to-morrow. It's that way with 'most everything, I guess. But, I will be leaving you, about here. The only thing we forgot to-day was the thing we set out to do—to locate a claim for you. But if that's all that you'll blame me for, I can figure on getting my usual sleep. *Some day*"—and her newly timid eyes could not combat his boldness—"some day we'll make you a real owner. You have a claim already that you don't know about."

As Alva walked on alone through the out-

skirts toward her establishment, she could not resist a backward glance. Although, as he had said, they had left undone the thing they had set out to do, yet she knew that something infinitely more important had been accomplished, for she had been left with so complete a sense of trust as to be almost happy. In this clear-thinking frame of mind, it would have been futile to deny that the man loved her, for both words and actions had made it perfectly plain. And, when she came to think of it, there seemed no good reason why she should thrust back anything so human or so wonderfully sweet. Even Donald, she thought with a sudden throb, would not object to her using so genuine a love to aid her ends. And so she did not stop at the little cemetery as she passed. She would ask no more questions of her grave. She had gained a stronger, saner aid to-day than any morbid deductions could secure. She had located a claim, and she would develop it.

She smiled to herself, wondering if he knew on how many points he had touched her. Also, she wondered again as to his quiet talk on "notions," until a remembrance of the phrase "without any crooked streaks in it"

came to mind. Could he have been thinking of her, after all? Was he thinking of her *now*? She looked back again and was confessedly disappointed. She saw from the way in which he strode steadily through the brush that he had put his mind to work on something else. Still looking, however, she saw him enter the main street of the town near its head, where a group of men were waiting for him. Alva thought their attitudes showed that a question was being put to him for decision. Presently the unknown matter seemed to be settled, for he was the first to move on, taking one of the group with him. When their steps took them in the direction of the Miners' Hall, Alva felt that something must have happened in Magnet that called for action.

A faint thrill went through her as she saw the camp's crude legal machinery being set in motion. Someone had made a complaint. Someone had said, "Such and such a man has done wrong," and had produced his proofs. Whereupon, a small body of men, self-appointed, came together, patiently reviewed the evidence, deliberated in their quiet way, and then acquitted or dealt out punishment with a finality that brooked no appeal.

Yet, in spite of her appreciation of its genuineness, Alva felt far from sure that the machinery would always work so smoothly. Although the Vigilance Committee would act quickly enough on a recent and flagrant crime, yet this looser form of government naturally called for very certain proofs, and if the evidence did not convince at once, the case would probably be shrugged away. And so, for all the new faith with which the past hour had inspired her, she began to feel almost as impotent to secure full justice when the time arrived as on her first day; a saddened mood that held her until she reached the door of her tent. There she was again reminded of yesterday's hysterical decisions, for on her doorstep sat the forlorn figure of Danny the Bum, squinting up at an imaginary adversary with whom he was carrying on a mumbled conversation.

Never a tall man, various causes had shortened and bowed the unfortunate Danny until, in his huddled attitude, he looked almost like a dwarf. His torn, misshapen khaki clothes, with their pristine brown blackened by the constant rubbing of food-greasy hands, hung on his spare frame as limply as a towel on a post.

Circling his red, leathery forehead, he wore the rim of a battered derby hat through whose crown his uncut gray thatch thrust up like a clump of withered bunch grass. On his right foot he wore a clumsy brogan—on his left, the top of an Oxford tie.

"Danny," said Alva pityingly, "I want you to work for me for a few days. Perhaps, if you keep sober, you can earn enough to buy a pair of shoes."

The man squinted up at her cautiously, then shook his head in utter dejection.

"Shoes," he said hopelessly, "*shoes is four dollars!*"

"But that's only four days' work," Alva remonstrated wonderingly. "Surely you can keep sober that long. Don't be afraid, Danny. Stay in the kitchen when you're not working. I won't let them get you."

"*Will* you?" the man quavered, while his blurred visage lighted up with hope. "Kin I sleep there, too? Night's the hard time fer me. But, say!" he cried excitedly. "If there really *wuz* shoes in it, I c'u'd lock myself in, now couldn't I?"

"But, no," he went on, and plucked thoughtfully at the hair protruding through his hat.

"I reckon, after all, it wouldn't be just right to confine a big business man like me at night when things are going on. I—I—I got to 'tend to my affairs, you see. I—I got *business* to transact."

"A claim, of course," smiled Alva, while she puzzled over ways to straighten him out.

"That's wot," said Danny keenly. "You know how it is. You've got one, too?"

"Perhaps—perhaps I have, Danny," the woman answered. "I don't really know."

"Like me," said Danny promptly. "A felluh took mine away from me once, but I can't think *who* it was. Or where the claim lay. I'm sure it wasn't old Peter Silk, becuz *he* took Mexican Frank's just as soon as he heard the reward was out, and it wasn't Dick Randall, becuz he got Jaffray's—"

"*Danny!*" the woman cried suddenly, with a note of horror in her voice. "How *did* Randall get the Jaffray claim?"

Unprepared for the sudden attack, the man shrank back as if he had been struck. His face grew even more vacuous than before. He seemed paralyzed with fright.

"*Danny!*" commanded the woman savagely. "Tell me what I want to know, or I'll have you

put in jail." Gripping him convulsively by the arms, she shook the impotent shell of a man to and fro till his teeth rattled. "Tell me instantly how he got that claim!"

"I—I—I—I ain't sayin' *how* he got it," chattered Danny. "He *took* it, that's all I know. And you won't put me in jail nuther—'cuz there ain't any jail. Young Jaffray—he's dead, you know—deader than a doornail—nice, young felluh, wot won't ever come back. *He* wouldn't do nuthin' to Randall, no he wouldn't—and Randall, he can't do nuthin' to *him*." Danny's voice rose to a quavering falsetto, and he looked wildly about, like a trapped animal trying to escape. "But *he* didn't fuss with *him* much. He had rights, you see—not like a stick-up man that needs money like he did last night. He hit me in the eye, he did—down there at Tiger Lil's."

Alva's grip relaxed and her hands fell limply at her sides. Incoherent as was the jumble of words, the accursed suspicion instantly leaped into life again and built up another swiftly linking chain of proof. At other times, her saner judgment would have contemptuously rejected the worthless mixture of hearsay and falsity, but to-day, in spite of all

her good spirits of a moment ago, Alva suddenly became irresponsible. The virulent sickness that had been growing in her for so long needed only a shock like this to drain her vitality away like blood drawn off into a basin. Unhearing and colorless, nauseated by the return of the old conviction, she swayed dizzily to and fro.

No sooner did Danny feel himself free than his small stock of courage returned and his features brightened. He did not know why the woman's voice had failed her or why her face had grown ashen, but at the first faint symptoms of distress, he felt impelled to offer all the valuable information at his command.

"Oh, don't you worry about what I'm tellin' you," Danny expostulated. "It's all true. He's a bad man. I've got him all writ down in my little book—all I see him do, so's I kin read it to myself every night." Fumbling in his tattered vest, he whipped out a battered, coverless notebook, and waved it before her unseeing eyes. "Oh, he's a regguler business man, Danny is. Everything he sees and hears he writes down and keeps. *All kinds of things*," he whispered mysteriously in her ear. "Skin games he sees—and murders—and

places he got hand-outs—and ways to find lost mines at night—and lots more things that'll make him a rich man some day.

"Last night, it was, I see him a-talkin' to you—and I writes it down. And I followed him when he went away—and I'll get him yet. You don't know where he went, but the *book* knows! 'Tiger Lil's'—that's where he went. Oh, hoh! So you didn't know he was a friend of hers!" Danny exclaimed delightedly, as Alva shrank back in disgust. "You bet he's her friend! Everybody knows it. Your old Sarah knows it, too.

"But say! He hit me in the eye. He shouldn't have did that—it hurt. And so I followed him—all night I followed him—and when I came back, I writes it in me little book. And that's what makes me a valible man in this yere community," he continued proudly. "That's why they got to pay attention when I talk. I got information on important points, you see. And some day these yere big men around yere—they'll get into their ottomobiles and come to my office and say:

"'Danny,' they'll say, 'you know and we know that things ha' gotta be regulated in this yere camp, and we hear that you've got a lot

of big ideas in your little book. Now we're willing to make a great big offer just to take one little peek inside. We hereby offer you as much as *ten thousand*—why, *pshaw*, no—money ain't nuthin' to us, or to you, nuther—we offer you a *hundred thousand dollars* in good hard cash just for that one little valible book.'

"And then I looks 'em over, and while I'm pretending to admire their ottomobiles and their silk hats and their big, thick watch chains, I see 'em a-winkin' at each other. And wot do I know *then*? I knows they're figurin' to get my book *too cheap*!

"And so I gets werry, werry ca'm—and I leans back in my revolvin' chair—wot goes round and round when you touch it just with your little finger—and I puts my feet on my big desk, and I says to 'em: 'Gentlemen,' says I, with a yawn and a stretch, 'I'm sorry to say that my brekfuss ain't settin' just ezackly right this morning, and I ain't overanxious to do business. You make that offer of yours a bonded lease fer *ten times* that little bunch of money, and mebbe I'll take time to consider it. *Good day, gentlemen—good day!*' "

CHAPTER VII

ALTHOUGH Alva woke long before dawn, a splitting headache held her inert among her tumbled coverings, staring up the ridgepole of her tent as she thought she had stared up into the darkness all night long. Not until the long, hot fingers of the midsummer sun lanced through the flap of her tent and she heard old Sarah pottering around the stove, could she rouse herself to take up another day's false duties. Heavy, dull-eyed, and listless, she went about the dreary business of dressing with never a look into the mirror that would have given her some much-needed advice, and finally joined the old woman in the kitchen, her hair wound loosely about her head and her face congested with the night's impotent thinking.

"Well, this is the day you're popular!" remarked the hardy frontiers-woman cheerily, as she stuffed greasewood into the stove. "The Town-site Company's big dance comes off to-night. They'll all be honeyin' around

here soon. I wisht I wuz young and beautiful again. I'd like to whirl a few meself."

"Dance?" echoed Alva, with a mirthless laugh. "Why should anyone want to dance *here?*"

"You'll see why soon enough when the young felluhs begin snoopin' round," was Sarah's sage retort. "You can't keep young blood still, even in the Funerals. I guess you'll go, fast enough. I never see a pretty girl yet that wasn't crazy to be pestered to death over a dance, and you needn't think *you'll* get by, missy!"

"That's what *I* say," agreed a breezy voice in the doorway, as Mrs. Baker's bulky figure announced her morning call. "You and me and Andy's wife and that freckled-faced misery from Bindelmann's books ain't very many to entertain three hundred men, but we ought to try it if only for society's sake. Baker says the Committee scraped the desert clean as far south as the Borax Works, and only bagged a squaw. But the new stage driver claims that Ash Meadows is sending the spring tender's sister if she can only find a somewheres-new flour sack for an evening waist, and Amargosa's good for a half dozen

Mormon calamities 'most always, so I guess we can keep them hopping. For the land's sake, Alva! What *is* the matter with your eyes? Don't say you won't *go*!"

"I hadn't thought of it," was the listless reply. "I don't see why I should."

"I don't see why you *shouldn't*," retorted the keen-eyed Mrs. Baker promptly. "See here, now. Don't you get *queer* and catch this 'desert loco.' I know you're always wearing black, but I always figure that we owe a heap more to the living than— Why, *you* don't want people to go to thinking that you're snobby and stuck-up, do you? You *can't*! You're a business woman!"

The older woman surveyed the other's slipshod attire for a moment with a searching eye, and then let her voice soften with sympathy. "If there's anybody around here that ain't treating you just exactly right and making you feel unhappy, you just let me know," she said. "But, pshaw! What's the use of talking about it! Of *course* you'll go—with Blewitt, too—or I miss my guess. He's had the camp's only full-dress suit, including pants, airing on a bush for nearly a week."

"Don't put too much of your money on

Blewitt, Mis' Baker," remarked Sarah, while the two worthies exchanged knowing glances. "I guess I know who's got Miss Pretty picked out long ago."

"Sarah," commanded Alva curtly, "go see if the tables are ready. We've pottered along this morning till we're very late." Then she turned to Mrs. Baker.

"Yes. I'll go to the dance to-night," she said, with a hot face and glittering eyes. "But it won't be with the man you're thinking of. No, I won't tell you my reasons," as the other showed her surprise. "You'll know why some day. All of you will know it."

"*Why!* I didn't know he was *married!*" quavered her friend. "Don't tell me he's been *deceiving* you, Alva!"

Alva gave the other a look of mingled exasperation and wonder.

"Is that the only reason you can think of, Amelia? Can't a man do *anything* else that's wrong?"

"Not—not—not so's you wouldn't go with him to a *dance!*" stammered Mrs. Baker. "Why—I went once with a horse thief, down to Hackberry! He told me they were after him, all right, before we went, but he figured

he could go to the dance and get away again before they began to bother him.

“ ‘I’m the lickin’est best waltzer in any five counties north of the Coloraydo, Amelia,’ says he, ‘and I kin prove it, too—if they’ll only give me a show for my white alley.’

“But they were that sore at him they only gave us time for the grand march and a stingy little polka before they spoke to him, and the poor fellow never had his chance. You see, Alva—*dances* are *different*. People have got to be on their good behavior at *them*. Killings and foolishness don’t go. Well—think it over before you go to giving up your friends. Men ain’t as bad as they seem. They’ve just got to be doing things all the time, I guess. Here! Take this. It’s a letter I brought down from the post office for you. I guess the man who addressed it didn’t like to give himself away.”

With breakfast over, Alva soon found proof of Sarah’s shrewdness in the shamelessly loitering tactics of several sheep-eyed young miners around the front door, and so made a quick retreat to the kitchen before she could be approached. Here she leaned heavily against the rear doorway, with her forehead

pressed against her arm, and stared out at the fierce, hot morning.

The softer lights of spring had given way long since to a merciless, dry brightness that came on as soon as the sun blazed up over the glittering ranges. It seemed as if night were no sooner gone than day leaped up, full armed and fiendishly eager to clamp down the brazen dome of noontide on the sun-baked plain.

And as Alva stood there staring with fixed fierceness at the yellow ground, where the beady-eyed lizards flickered through the thin shadows of the greasewood and the ugly refuse of the camp glittered, unburied, in the searching light, it came to her that *she*, apparently, was the only person in Magnet who knew the man Randall as he really was. Long ago she had acknowledged his strength, but she had never seen till now how cleverly it cloaked his selfishness.

She began to see two personalities in him: One of the two was keen, purposeful, and active-minded, even charitable and gentle where it suited his aims. The other was animated by a calculating selfishness that was controlled by an exceptionally adroit brain. Of course, there was no such thing as remorse in his char-

acter, for he could not afford to waste time on it. Nor was there pity, except where policy dictated that it should be shown.

And so she glowered, moody-eyed, from her doorway, feeding her over-wrought mind on miserable thoughts until she had nothing but hatred for a man who could deceive her so shrewdly.

Alongside the tent the brush crackled as someone strode hastily through it from the street in front. Before she knew it, she found herself looking into Randall's eyes.

Taller and noticeably broader in his working clothes than in the better-shaped garments she had always seen him wear, he dropped his shining lunch bucket on the ground and laughed freely as he put out his hand to restrain the shrinking that he thought was due only to surprise.

"I figured you'd be here," he said, with a twinkle in his eye over the success of his small stratagem. "Those young friends of yours are thicker than flies around a sugar barrel out in front. I've only a minute now before I go on shift—but I want you to go with me to that dance to-night. *Will you?*"

Vigorous, clear-eyed and clean, there was an

almost oppressive freshness of youth and strength in his movements. Less like a man to-day than like a big, fearless, laughing boy, with a broad, deep chest and a full brown throat that swelled against the band of his shirt, he thrust such an overpowering sense of virility on her as to make her head swim. She threw up her arm convulsively, as if to ward off something.

A thousand thoughts flashed through her mind in the tumult, but out of all her mingled feelings of fear and attraction a single impulse rose dominant, and that, curiously enough, contained nothing that concerned Donald. It was one of purely personal anger—of disgust at a man who would deliberately leave her companionship to seek that of a common mining-camp entertainer.

“After your careful confessions of yesterday,” she said, with biting distinctness, “I did not believe that all women would seem alike to you—but I see I was mistaken.”

At this curious answer to his invitation, the man drew back a step and stood still. Whether or not he was surprised by the sudden attack, he gave no sign of anything except the most acute attention. With eyes as

steady as his motionless body, he stood watching and waiting silently, as if he saw that she had not yet had all her say.

Translating this as pure brazenness and scorning him the more for it, she lowered her voice so as to make her words bite deeper.

"Why come to *me* for your dances?" she asked, through her set teeth, while her eyes glittered. "Why not seek those who are more accustomed to make your entertainment? Can it be that you, like the 'friend' you spoke of so feelingly yesterday, are seeking inspiration? What makes you think you can find it here? You flatter me too much. I had not guessed I would ever be used to serve so interesting a purpose. In fact, I must confess that I had never considered entering the race at all—and shall have to decline now."

His face whitened perceptibly and his brows knitted, but he did not step back. With his eyes still quiet on hers, he seemed to be trying to understand the nature of her hot anger rather than its words.

She felt this and instantly grew furious. It was too much as if he were a judicial parent meditating the tantrums of a petulant child.

"Go!" she commanded contemptuously.

"You sicken me. I only wonder if your curious sense of decency has been waked enough to keep you from approaching me again. I shall go to your dance to-night, but it will not be with anyone so magnificently adaptable as yourself. Have I made myself clear?"

"No, Miss Leigh," he answered quietly, "you have *not*. It so happens that I know what you're driving at—but you are completely mistaken."

She stared for a moment, and then laughed derisively. "Do you ask me to disbelieve what everyone in the camp knows? Because I am the last to know must I be the first to be deceived again?"

"Miss Leigh," he said, while his strong, level eyes began to take command, "doesn't your good sense tell you that you've got me figured out all wrong here? Of course, if you have what you think is proof of something against me, it would be hard to leave it out of your calculations, but let all that go for a minute. Ask yourself about *me*—just plain *me*. Have I acted like a dishonorable man? What is it that backs up your proof? What is behind it all?"

Alva hesitated before she cast off all re-

straint. His words demanded the precise answer which she could not give. Confronted with the necessity of flatly accusing him of consorting with abandoned women, her proofs seemed so pitifully thin and weak that she dared not face the look that would surely come into those relentless eyes.

She put up her hand in a repelling gesture that seemed to express both weariness and disgust. The truth was that most of it was fear.

"Why should I have a reason?" she asked, with a swift attack to which, she knew, there could be no defense. "The matter is entirely personal. As a matter of fact, I—I—I—have taken a dislike to you—a personal dislike. What is to be looked into there? Even if nothing could be proved about you, I fail to see why I should be forced to discuss my private tastes. Yes, we can let it stand on *that*," she went on, as he began to draw back. "You will not be far wrong if you think there are things about you that I find detestable—personal qualities that are intensely repugnant—things that I—I—"

Alva's voice faded away before the awful look that came into the man's eyes. Astonishment, sorrow, pitiful disappointment, and a mo-

mentarily self-accusing shame swept across his face in waves. His chin fell, and he grew almost haggard. He shrank back as if he had been lashed with a whip, his eyes full of mortal hurt. She had cut deep into the only spot that he could never hope to protect.

"I guess—I guess I can't say much against *that*," he said, in a colorless voice. "I reckon it wouldn't be much use to try. *That's* something I can't ever beat—no—not ever." His eyes were dull and lifeless—a blank wall behind which he was passing through cruel tortures. His hand, generally so expressive in gestures, moved weakly as he tried to collect his thoughts. "I wonder how I was so big a fool as not to see your feelings before. Perhaps I could have changed some, then—or tried to fix myself up different. But probably *not*. Because if I'm a mean, low fellow, associating with bums, male and female—why, then, I reckon I have always been one—and it wouldn't do much good to try to change."

He paused and raised his haggard face.

"I guess I'll go now," he said. "There isn't anything that I can do or say. I know, of course, just as I always *have* known, that there are plenty of things about me that would seem

unpleasant to a lady, but I've always kept hoping that they were only the little things that could be changed—that she might even *like* to change, so as to show them as her work. I've hoped that they were only stringers, and that the main vein was just a little higher grade.

"But I reckon I didn't make a close enough assay. *Your* weigh-up seems to have been a little more correct. Still—I can't help wishing that you'd tell me why—that you'd be fair and show your samples. Somehow, it seems as if you had made your inspection just a teeny bit *late*. Because, if my clothes aren't clean, or my mind polished up and perfumed, or my remarks tied up with little pink ribbons, why, they weren't that way yesterday, either—"

He halted, struck by a sudden thought.

"Nor yesterday—nor yesterday, either," he repeated.

For some reason, his eyes lost their dulled look, and grew bright with returning vitality. He turned back and scrutinized her as she stood with head averted and hand put out to motion him away. He looked once more—with a hungering, irresistible probing of his relentless eyes—then made one great step forward and caught her hand.

"It *isn't* that—and you know it!" he whispered fiercely. "You *couldn't* hate me so after all these weeks."

"How dare you?" she flamed. "Unloose my hand! *Go!* I *do* hate you and despise you, just as I said—" She broke into a sudden storm of tears and hid her face in her arm.

"*Do* you hate me?" he murmured exultantly in her ear. "Why, Alva—I don't care. Go right ahead—you can hurt me all you want to *now*."

"Go!" she cried from behind her shielding arm. "I have nothing to say."

"Yes. I'll go," he answered happily, and released her hand. He laughed outright and squared his shoulders. His precious possession had not been stolen, after all. "You wouldn't say such foolish things about me unless the *real* reason behind it all was no good—and so I'm not afraid of that one, either. Good-by—till to-night." He picked up his pail, and was gone.

When Alva's next connected thought came to her, she was in her dining room, staring around among her empty tables. She felt weak and shell-like—as if she had been sapped of all power to think. The moment he had begun to

· speak for himself—at the mere sound of his voice—she had weakly lost faith in her convictions again. Something was wrong—somewhere—everywhere—and she rubbed her hand against her forehead in an attempt to ease her troubled mind.

Something scratched her cheek, and she saw the letter that Mrs. Baker had given her, clutched in her fingers. She studied the crudely printed address with puzzled eyes, caught the scent of musk which established the letter's source better than a signature could have done, then opened it, her lips curling with disdain.

Ask Dick Randall why they never tried to find the man that shot young Jaffray.

Alva threw back her head and laughed—loud and hysterically. At the sound of a step behind her, she turned, still laughing wildly, and saw Duncan, clean shaven and well dressed, standing in the doorway.

"About that dance to-night," he began eagerly, with a fatuous smile over his reception. "I came—"

"To ask me to go," interrupted Alva. "I'll be delighted."

She met him halfway and gave him both her hands, her wide eyes and heightened color giving out so vivid a sense of what he thought was pleasure that his face reddened, and he stammered.

"It's about *time* you asked me!" she heard a wildly vibrant voice saying. "*You!* To say all those nice things to me only two nights ago and then never come near me for a whole day! Is that the way you treat ladies up in Idaho?" *Her* voice, surely—but where did such strange words come from?

"But you big, good-looking men are all alike," her voice went on, with a gayly railing note. "If I told you that I'd refused another man to wait for you, you'd be so conceited that you'd never dance with me at all—now, would you?" And this strange, warm-breathed, big-eyed Alva was suddenly in overpowering proximity to him, her fresh, red mouth pouting her mock anger dangerously close to his own. "Don't tell me that the only friend I have in camp would treat me that way."

"But Randall—" the man stammered, unwilling to believe his ears.

"Oh, if you don't want me, just say so," she said airily. "Are you making up other men's

dance cards for them? Isn't mine enough? Run along, now, and don't bother me. You're a nuisance. What time shall you come for me?" And she saw someone's fingers actually twisting a button on his coat.

"Around nine o'clock," he answered thickly, and reached out his arms, only to feel her slip tantalizingly out of his grasp.

Noon and the dinner hour came.

Wherever Alva passed between the lines of crowded tables, men covertly wiped their lips and leaned back with a smile to speak about the dance.

"Duncan's rightly no waltzer, ma'am. You'll not be forgetting your real friends to-night."

"I'm Mormonish in my ways, and pray before each dance. Kin I start work now on that third two-step?"

"Make him show his union card, lady. Me—I got a certificate from the gov'ment on *my* dancing!"

At the end of one of the tables, however, she encountered another element, for as she paused there, a man with a heavy black beard, whom she recognized as Randall's relief at the Cactus shaft, spoke to her in an undertone:

"Is Duncan your real choice for to-night, ma'am?"

"Yes. I expect to go with Mr. Duncan," Alva answered, before she thought. "But I hardly see why you ask."

Dropping her eyes rather casually to meet his own, she was surprised to find them entirely lacking in the semi-flirtatious interest she had expected. On the contrary, the black-bearded man seemed weighing some policy in his mind, and the flavor of watchfulness and possible interference that the look held made her flush with anger.

"Are you quite sure that it is your business to know with whom I go to dances?" she asked icily.

"Well," answered the man, with a deadly definiteness that she had encountered once or twice before among such men in Magnet, "I simply wanted to *know*, and now I *do* know. No harm done, lady. Scull me the cake, Jim."

An hour later, the tool boy from the Cactus shaft knocked at her door and handed in a note nipped twixt greasy thumb and finger. The note had been written hastily in pencil—and there was a drop of oil on the outside. Alva's eyes hardened as soon as she saw it.

"There is no answer," she said, and, tearing the note in pieces, she let it fall on the floor. As the boy lounged away, with his tongue in his cheek, she looked down and read on an up-turned fragment, "don't." Alva slid her foot across the paper and blotted out the word.

That afternoon she spent with Mrs. Baker, who, after puzzling over her friend's alternate fits of gayety and moroseness, finally spoke her mind as follows:

"You've got just the same amount of sense to-day as a week-old jack rabbit. Something tells me you'll be making a lot of trouble to-night among the men. I must say I never figured you were such a perfectly scandalous flirt."

The woman with the ever-growing pain in the back of her head looked utterly incredulous.

"*Flirt?*" she echoed hollowly. "Then the desert has indeed changed me." And, after another moment's staring at the calm and collected postmistress, she murmured an inaudible good-by, and slipped out of the door, a thoughtful, almost frightened, look on her face.

As she passed down the street, she saw Randall. He was standing on a corner, talking in low tones with one of the men who had met

him the afternoon before. As she passed by with only a faint inclination of her head she heard the fragmentary sentence, "He bought a pair of spurs at four o'clock." Almost at once, a step sounded behind her, and she felt him walking at her side.

"Unless you want to make both of us look foolish, you might let me walk a little way with you," he said. "People are watching."

"I'm not responsible," she answered coldly.

"Perhaps not," was the reply, "and I'm risking things much worse than that which you might say, but I *must* tell you again that you may make a mistake to-night—"

"I shall ask you to leave me here," she interrupted. "I don't care to have anything to do with you—and I'm quite able to take care of myself."

He looked at her with a wistful expression in his fine eyes, while his face grew even graver than before.

"I'm sorry," he said, with no bitterness in his tones. "Remember this much, anyway"—and his eyes shone on her with so much of their old, kindly light that she could not help marveling—"I'll always be *there!*"

Evening came, and lights sprang up in the new, yellow-boarded town hall. At nine o'clock, Mrs. Baker made her appearance, ostensibly to borrow a brooch, but when she found that Alva was dressed and ready, she hurried away without the ornament. Her house was full of ribbony Mormon girls fighting for the mirror, she said, and the front parlor was a foot deep in violet talcum.

"Oh, yes," she added briefly over her shoulder. "There's something doing to-night among the men, too, though I don't know just what it is. We'll hear more about it in the morning."

Alva resumed her seat by the dining-room lamp and took up her unread book again. She had been there for nearly an hour, staring at the blank walls of the tent and wondering what mad impulse had driven her to accept a comparatively unknown escort. The hysteria of the night and morning had given way to a resigned floating with the current, yet she could not help pondering that twice-rejected advice and the vague rumors that had come to Mrs. Baker's ears.

But although her regret for her bargain steadily grew, she had not long to puzzle over

these things, for Duncan presented himself promptly, and she saw that she would have to go.

"If only he has been drinking, I can refuse," she thought hopefully. But there was nothing objectionable in Duncan's face or manner. The only thing she noticed about him was a certain quietness that contrasted oddly with his good spirits of that morning.

As she looked at him in the full light of the lamp, however, she began to realize how very little she actually knew about the man, and, except for his deceptive smile, how thin-lipped and hard-faced he was. She said something to make his lips part and saw that his smile was forced; she knew now that it had always been that way, if she had only taken time to study it. The conviction grew on her that something was very wrong with him to-night, and, in an agony of regret for her rashness, she cast about desperately for some reasonable excuse that would allow escape.

Music started up in the hall next door while she kept him waiting on various pretexts, and she heard the grate of feet on the porch. Again she studied him, and saw a hidden tension in his attitude and an obvious effort to

hear what was being said outside. He passed his tongue across his lips, as if they were dry, and swallowed with a visible effort.

"Well," he said nervously. "Well? Shall we go?"

It seemed to Alva as if she were living and acting in a dream. She could not guess what the man before her had done, but she now knew perfectly well that he had committed some crime. And yet she felt as helpless as if she were in the grip of some horrible nightmare. While every instinct fought in favor of refusal the ghastly shape of impending tragedy so filled her mind that it numbed her into silence. As they neared the door, the horror of her position finally overcame everything else, and she halted, with a blanched face. But other couples behind them forced them on, and she passed into the well-filled room and crossed as quickly as possible to where Mrs. Baker, flanked by her Mormon friends, sat surrounded by a dozen men.

No sooner had she gained a seat near the protecting wing and collected herself, than she, in turn, was surrounded, and, with the strengthening influence of friendly faces buoying her up, she decided to feign illness and es-

cape at the first opportunity. Duncan, she saw, was hovering about on the outside of the circle, but her sensibilities, now grown tremendously acute, interpreted every nervous half laugh he gave, and read every uneasy look.

In spite of Mrs. Baker's presence, a chill of fear gathered around her heart. She began to be unable to look about her. Music, gayety, laughter, polished floor, and hum of voices, all became a ghastly travesty of enjoyment. For all the set smile with which she made her answers, her face grew pinched and white. Lifting her misery-full eyes with an effort at the sound of a voice close by, she felt herself grow cold from head to foot. The night-hoist engineer from the Cactus shaft—the black-bearded man at the end of the table—was speaking to her in the same significant tones that he had used that morning. When she caught the note of warning in his voice, she knew that the end was not far off.

"Lady," said he, "I guess you ain't feeling very peart to-night. You look like you'd better be home. I'll take you, lady, if you want to go."

The look of agony that she turned on him was enough to let him read her instant con-

sent, but before she could rise, the music started up, and Duncan stood before her.

"My dance," he said, with his thin smile. "Not figuring to steal this lady away from me, are you, Ryan?"

The black-bearded man rose as Alva rose, and moved away, with barely a glance at the questioner.

"No. I never worked at thieving much," he said. "I'm 'most too tired out at night to have *two* trades. I'll be waiting, lady—out by the door. I'll reckon you'll be going soon."

It was on the tip of her tongue to cry out to him to wait, but as she faltered, the black-bearded man quickened his steps toward the door, as if he saw something there, and in another moment it was too late. They were standing. The music was playing. Eyes were watching. They must dance.

As they moved across the hall and turned down the side in a waltz, Alva felt that everyone's eyes were on them. She also saw that the doorway was full of men, in some way a different-looking group from the idlers who generally hung around the entrance. As their slow circling brought them nearer, she saw Randall in the front row and behind him the

set, watchful faces of the men whom she had often seen with him before. Beside him stood the forlorn, but picturesque, figure of Danny the Bum, resurrected lately from some hiding place, much the worse for wear.

Nearer and nearer the circling two came to the group in the doorway, and more and more Alva felt the force of their eyes. When they came opposite, she saw Randall turn to the crowd and shake his head. While she wondered what it all meant, she felt her partner's arm slacken and saw Danny the Bum spring out of the group with a shrill cry of alarm.

"That's him! There he is!" he shouted. "The felluh wot held 'em up at the Point o' Rocks!"

Instantly Alva felt herself swung ten feet or more away across the slippery floor. Whether the man pushed her or she sprang away she never knew, but immediately she was crouching against a bench by the wall. Looking back, she saw a revolver flash out in Duncan's hand, as the men at the door broke for him across the shining floor.

Randall was foremost, his face distorted in an effort to reach the shrill-voiced Danny a step ahead. Later, she remembered that he

cried out to the men behind him not to shoot.

In front of her and all around the hall, men stopped dancing and threw back their coats or dug frantically at their waistbands. But Alva somehow knew that all would be too late. The sinister thing in Duncan's hand had been leveled too long—was pointed too straight. Yet she also knew that the weapon was not pointed at the shrunken figure of the accuser, but at the man now half in front of Danny, trying to thrust him back. Just before the deafening roar of the revolver sounded, she heard an ear-piercing sound. Afterward, she learned that she had screamed.

There was no second shot. Only a rushing wave of men that broke a little over a body, and then rolled over the gunman and beat him savagely to the floor. Panting and yelling, they fought for holds on his arms and legs. Most of all, they clutched at the angrily fighting hand that waved the weapon dangerously about until a heavy boot stamped down on it with frightful force and crushed the revolver out of its grasp. Then they disentangled themselves, cursing fluently with relief, and left two of their number sitting on the prisoner, one of whom pulled a pair of handcuffs from

his pocket and manacled the wrists that the other held up. Then the man who had had the handcuffs stood up and looked about him. It was Randall.

"Get back, everybody," Alva heard him say. "Clear the hall, boys. This will end the dancing. You're all safe, ladies. We're sorry we had to make such a muss."

He stooped over the smaller of the two men on the floor and spoke to him gently.

"Everything's all right now, Danny," he said, with a good-humored pat on the back. "We're much obliged to you. You'd better get up and dance."

But Danny did not look as if he had heard, and Danny did not get up, even though he might dance. Danny had "business to transact." The time had come for the Head Bookkeeper to cast up Danny's accounts and strike a final balance. And it was not Danny's little book that carried the last and greatest credit, nor any book in Magnet.

"*He jumped in front of me!*" Alva heard Randall crying, as he straightened up. His eyes swept the room until they found hers, and then plunged into them, stark with regret. "I

was trying to hold him back, but he saw it coming, and took it for himself!"

He spoke out his defense to her over the heads of the crowd with as instinctive an appeal for belief as a husband's voice would have carried to his wife. It was as if she must know at once exactly how it had happened.

For a moment his self-possession seemed to leave him, but presently the wild look left his face and his eyes grew calm again. When they shifted from hers and the chain was broken, Alva realized all that her rashness this day had cost her. Sick at heart, she covered her face with her hands and sank back against the wall.

Feet were hurrying past her to the door in the wake of the grim group surrounding the prisoner, and she heard voices calling to her as the women scurried by in frightened haste, but all such sounds, as well as the hoarse shouts ringing in the street, the rush of footsteps along the sidewalks, and the exclamations of the men as they turned over the body on the floor, were lost in the wave of misery that drowned her soul. After a long time, when the silence had forced itself on her, she took

her hands from her eyes and saw Mrs. Baker sitting quietly beside her.

The older woman reached over and took an unresisting hand in a firm grip.

"Now, don't you go to feeling bad, Alva," she said. "You couldn't help it. Nobody could—not even Dick Randall, though he tried mighty hard at the last minute. If Danny hadn't made his break, they'd have taken him when they wanted him and not before."

Alva's face seemed set in stone. With staring, tearless eyes she looked straight before her.

"All that is of no consequence whatever," she said, in a dead voice. "I am *disgraced!*"

The Westerner stared for a moment, then frowned and gripped the limp hand tighter.

"Alva," she said cuttingly, "what makes you think you're so darn' much better than the rest of us out here? If you're disgraced, then so was I at Hackberry years ago, but I didn't lose much sleep over it, because nobody would have believed it. I advise you to get next to yourself, Alva. This isn't the ballroom of the Palace Hotel. This is a rough, hard place, where we do the best we can for our fun and

get all out of life that's coming to us. Maybe we get smutted up a little, but we know we did it all for the best, and so it doesn't hurt us, after all.

"But the thing that *will* hurt you is your thinking you're so darned good that *now* you're done for, just because you talked for a while with someone who wasn't straight. My advice to you, Alva, is to get a good grip on yourself and go home to bed. The worst way you can put on airs around here is to circulate the idea that you're disgraced."

In silent response, Alva gathered herself together and let the other woman lead her from the hall. More than ever a mockery in this hideous place, the cheap bunting draped around the unpainted joists and flaring lamps seemed a fitting index to the whole tawdry life, but for the saving clause that someone had taken down a section of the bright cheesecloth and laid it over Danny's body.

Within the ballroom the blood spots were bright on the shining floor, but outside, the clean, white stars were gleaming, and the great body of a night wind was pressing softly out of the vague waste. Never in her life before had air seemed so wildly sweet. She opened

her mouth, like an exhausted runner, and drank it down with long, quivering breaths. She felt as if she had broken out of a foul, contaminating jail. The open space about her was like a great pool of water into which she might plunge and try to cleanse herself.

For a moment the two women stood close together, listening. Everywhere saloon doors were fanning and men were running and shouting through the warm darkness. A hundred yards away, a crowd bulked vaguely in the open street, but the murmur of only a single voice came to their ears. Presently there was a slow movement, and the dark mass of men, with their prisoner, faded silently out of the street and passed between the tents on to the open hillside to the west.

"I wonder what they're up to now?" the Western woman muttered thoughtfully. "There ain't any jail, you know."

"I know," Alva answered, while a pang went through her at the thought of her foolish threat against Danny the day before.

As the two women watched and whispered, the crowd came to a halt. Someone in the group lit a lantern. A man's figure showed motionless among the others shifting around

the glow. Then a hand was laid on his shoulder, and he seemed to slide down to the ground, sitting stiffly upright as if he were leaning against something.

"They've handcuffed his hands behind him around a post!" Mrs. Baker whispered understandingly. "Dick Randall's discovery post!"

A cry of horror rose to Alva's lips.

"In the graveyard?" she quavered, yet knew well enough where it was.

"Why not?" the other woman responded stonily. "Didn't he send Danny there? He'll be there himself to-morrow. Come, Alva. We've had enough."

Back in her tent alone, Alva lit the swinging lamp, only to put it out again immediately, and throw herself, face downward, on her bed without undressing. One after another the horrible day's happenings trooped through her mind like a motion picture reel that would never stop unwinding until, at an hour long after midnight, she gave up all hope of calming herself, and lifted her hot head from the pillow.

Some time before, she had acquired the habit of raising the western wall of her tent so that she could look up the hillside toward Donald's grave when she woke in the early morn-

ing, and now, as she stared out, she saw the tiny, yellow flame of a lantern flickering near the top of the hill.

The camp had grown strangely still. The tents were dark, and the only sound that came to her ears was the mournful howl of a coyote trotting over the plain. The moon dropped down to the edge of the ragged sky line. Outlined against the bright disk she saw the motionless black figure of a man, sitting with his back against a post.

Little by little Alva rose from her bed. She was not conscious of forming any determination as she slipped under the canvas and stepped out into the brush, or of arriving at her action by any particular process of reasoning. On the contrary, it was merely the old, grim resolve that drove her—the never-forgotten main-spring of purpose acting on the realization that to-morrow the man huddled there on the hill-side in hideous silhouette would be as dead as Magnet and a rope could make him, and that, with his passing, her principal source of information would be gone beyond recall.

There was no more than this—no remembrance of Randall's warnings or weighing of his motives—not even a recollection of that

crowded moment when his eyes had instinctively sought hers and the man had cried out his sorrow over Danny's sacrifice. Temporarily at least, all these things were forgotten, and the woman was walking silently but swiftly up the hill through the brush with her eyes fixed firmly on the figure and the light. Nearing the top of the hill, she turned off and walked over to where two men were seated on the ground, their revolvers lying between their feet, the lantern behind them. If she had been thinking of it, she would have known that they had been conscious of her approach for some time. Both the men rose as she came near, but remained silent.

"I should like to speak to him, if there are no objections," Alva said.

"We'll make it private for you, ma'am," they said, and moved away.

Alva went directly to the man at the post. It did not matter if he were asleep, because a long time ago—years, it seemed—she had known that she would wake him. But the man handcuffed to the post was not asleep—and he knew her.

"Duncan," said Alva, "do you know why I am in Magnet?"

The man barely lifted his dulled eyes, but she read his answer in a short movement of his head. She also saw that he knew what the morning would bring. With the end so plainly in sight, he must surely speak the truth.

"I'm here to find the man who shot Donald Jaffray. I think you know, and I want you to tell me who it was."

The man made no reply for a time, but only wet his dried lips with his tongue and stared past her. When he spoke at last, it was with a counter question.

"You were talking with a man on the street to-day," he said, in a voice so dead that an icy hand seemed to reach into her heart and close around it. "He told you not to go to the dance with me to-night. Am I right?"

"Yes," she answered. "But what has that to do with you or me?"

The man raised his head and gave her one full, searching look. Then, although she could not see it, his eyes grew cold with the hate of a dying snake that knows the heel that crushed it.

"I'm surprised you didn't take his warning," he said. "But perhaps you know him like I do, and knew he would be figuring to make it look as if I'd killed young Jaffray, too. Dead

men tell no tales, they say—so I'll tell 'em while I'm still alive. If you want Don Jaffray's murderer, *you know where to find him!*"

Alva said nothing. Her ears had heard and her mind had recorded his words, but she was conscious of neither exultation nor regret. She had simply discovered what her instinct had sent her to Magnet to discover long months ago. In fact, now that part of it was over, the matter was put away for the time in the face of the more miserable present.

The silence lengthened. A puff of wind came up, then died away. The coyote whined for a second time across the waste. The moon sank down till only a silver edge showed above the black reef of the hill. The tents in the town below seemed like balls of phosphorescent thistledown floating on a silver-gray sea. Infinite miles away the bulk of the mountains, half seen, darkened the sky. Overhead, the stars began to glitter whitely for the last time.

Perhaps it was no narrow cell in which the man beside her was confined, and yet, to Alva, his was a far more dreadful prison. Illimitable distance seemed to spread out on every hand—long reaches down through the sage-sweet air to the dry lakes and deserts, north,

south, east, and west—aye, and up to those crisp stars overhead—nothing but loneliness—infinity. In the half light of approaching dawn, the hilltop became a solitary peak from which the man looked out over the whole world—the world he would have to give up when they spoke to him in the morning. It was only a little while, now. In an hour or two the sun would come up, and then—

A sound of voices came to her. Someone had come up through the brush, and was talking with the guards. She caught herself together with a shiver, looked, and saw the two and a taller man behind them watching her; then saw them turn away and fade into the darkness. A sense of her curious position in their eyes came to her, and she turned to hurry away. But the man raised his voice at the last moment.

“I’m all in,” he said, with his chin sunk on his breast and his mouth gone slack. “My checks go back in the rack to-morrow for some other fellow to play the rotten game with later on. It’s a funny thing—this life. I ain’t ever been what you’d call a ‘good’ man, I reckon, but I never figured that I’d get *this* deal. And here you come into my life—from

somewhere out there"—and he nodded his head at the dark mountains—"and you interfere with my play and I get careless, and before I know it—*you*—just a woman—a plain, ordinary woman that I never saw before, and don't care a snap of my finger about—you give me the little push that sends me skyhooting down the trail to hell."

He paused for a moment, staring out over his wide, silent world; at the dark pools between the ranges where the valleys lay; then up at the crisp, white stars glittering down through the millions of miles of loneliness.

"It's getting cold," he said. "My *mind* is cold. I guess that where I'm going will be a terrible lonely place. Why don't they tell us it ain't a fellow's *body* that gets hurt when he settles up? It don't seem right to hide a fellow's bill till he goes to pay. I wonder if ever a parson saw what I am seeing now!"

Alva could stand no more.

"Good-by!" she said. "Thank you for telling me what I wanted to know."

She put out her hand in farewell, then realized the futility of it, and hurried away.

Behind her, the man handcuffed to the post broke out in a jeering laugh.

CHAPTER VIII

THE first thing Alva was conscious of next morning was that she was wide awake and standing in the middle of her tent. She did not know what had roused her so suddenly, but as she stood there she felt a galvanic movement go through the camp from end to end and grow with the sound of hurrying feet and slamming doors. Dressing hastily, she slipped into the street.

From every tent and bunk-house men were coming—hatless and half dressed, their hair still matted over their eyes. All in a moment the signal had gone through Magnet, and, as Alva looked, the crowd around the Miners' Hall grew to hundreds. Even the women were astir, and Alva could see Mrs. Baker and her Mormon charges standing in front of the post office up the street. Near by, on the corner, the freckle-faced girl who slept in her cashier's cage in Bindelmann's store made a stiff half gesture at her, only to drop her hand and clutch a green sweater jacket around her

as she stared, white-faced, at the running, shouting men.

The group in front of the hall seemed composed of two bodies; an inner shell of men who stood still, and a vast fringe of newcomers who constantly circled around in an effort to find some one a head shorter than themselves. Finally all stood quiet while one man spoke. Then those on the side nearest Alva turned and began to walk toward her and the Bindelmann girl, whom she had joined on the store steps. They came directly on, the scattered, excited van—the close-walking, inner shell of men with the prisoner—the surging rabble alongside. Among them Alva saw the two guards of the night before and the black-bearded man, and at the prisoner's shoulder one other whose eyes looked full into hers and yet did not seem to see her. As they came on, she could hear the men around the prisoner talking among themselves:

“Fifty feet of half-inch will do.”

“Make it three-quarters.”

“Stop here till he gets it.”

“Hustle along, Dan.”

Before Alva and the girl could shrink back into the store, the crowd engulfed them. A

man hurried into the store, taking out his pocketknife as he went, and calling out nervously for someone to wait on him. Pressed close together, the two women stared into each other's eyes and clutched hands.

"I can't do it," the girl whimpered. "Let him find it himself!" And soon, through the silence, came the "rap-rap" of hard new rope on the floor as it was pulled hastily from the reel.

Hardly six feet away from her, the prisoner stood motionless in the center of a sibilant, constantly moving crowd, that seemed all open mouths and fascinated, staring eyes. Alva stared with the others for a morbid moment, then tore her eyes away and fastened them on the man beside the prisoner.

Two guilty men. One in handcuffs and one as free as air. One to go and one to stay. And he who had done the greater wrong was to be the other's executioner. Alva felt that there must be others in that encircling crowd who knew what she knew, and she wondered if they saw the hideous irony of it all. For one agonizing moment she felt an insane impulse to throw restraint to the winds and cry out at

him—then Randall's gaze shifted to hers, and she lost courage.

His face was not set or even grim. Instead, it held a sanity that contrasted so sharply with her own suffocating emotions that she felt herself pulled down to earth again. In some inexplicable way, the thing about to take place immediately became a necessity, even though *he* was in control—even though he was cleverly making justice serve his own ends. Their eyes met once more—his cool and level, hers hot with resentment—and she thought she read in his face a realization of his great good fortune. Then the man with the rope came out of the store, and the crowd moved on.

As the mob streamed away, the man with the rope hurried ahead to a telegraph pole up the street, a loose end of the yellow hemp writhing like a bright serpent through the dust of the road. Here he carefully estimated the distance to the crossbar and tossed the rope over the arm with a cow-puncher's sure aim. Unable to bear any more, Alva put her arm around the Bindelmann girl's shoulder and led her inside the store.

Five minutes later she interrupted the girl's

soft moaning into a pink-and-green comforter that lay on the counter:

"The men are coming back. I think it's over."

"Don't leave me," implored the girl from the depths of the comforter. "Did you see the awful look on his face when they took him away? I won't sleep for a week. Isn't this a simply *terrible* place!"

"It's no place for you, dear," Alva answered. "Make your father send you away."

"I guess he'll have to. I ain't very used to hangings," the girl replied.

When Alva went out on the street again, she found it dotted everywhere with men in twos and threes, although a good-sized group still stood at the foot of the pole. Near her, Randall and two others stood with their backs turned on the scene.

As Alva hesitated, wondering if he would have the hardihood to speak to her as he had done the day before, her attention was drawn to a man who hurried out of a tent with a square black box under his arm. This man ran across the street and spoke to the group around the pole. To Alva's surprise, she saw that the rope had not yet been taken down, and,

as she looked, several men came out of the circle with an end in their hands and began to pull. While she wondered what it all meant, the man from the tent stepped back a few feet into the road and leveled his box at something on the end of the rope, which was rising, straight and stiff, out of the center of the crowd. A cry of horror leaped from her lips. They were drawing the dead man up again to take his photograph!

No sooner had she cried out, than she felt the rush of several men past her—Randall in front, his eyes blazing, his face convulsed with anger. Another moment, and the camera was beaten out of the photographer's hands, and the three had charged headlong into the men at the end of the rope.

As if by magic, the saloons and tents emptied again into the street. The mob took form once more, no longer wordless and grim, but this time an angry, swearing rabble, that jostled and kicked and struck. A roar of voices went up and did not subside even when the three had cut their way savagely into the crowd and taken possession of the body. Then Randall's voice rang out high above the bel-lowing profanity.

"Go on! Keep right ahead!" he roared, shaking his fist in their faces. "Disgrace the camp just as far as you can! Make us the mark for every newspaper in the whole country! Even then you won't be playing as mean a trick as you were playing on this fellow here!"

A growl and a curse answered him. A fist shot out and brushed his cheek. Alva, several yards away, could hear the clean smack of Randall's blow as he planted his counter squarely in the other's face. There was a surging to and fro inside the crowd for a moment—then suddenly the attacker popped into view like a pea shelled out of a pod, and sprawled headlong on the ground. Scrambling to his feet, he made a belligerent show of taking off his coat to plunge in again. But the ridiculous figure he cut appealed to their sense of humor, and a gale of laughter was his only answer.

The crowd began to scatter for a second time, and Alva turned away toward her tent. It was the first time she had seen this man, or any man, so furiously angry, and, in spite of everything, she thrilled at the thought of how forcefully he had backed up his rebuke. As

she passed down the street with pale, thoughtful face, she wondered what manner of man was this who would first hang a criminal and then imperil his own life to save the body from insult.

It was only nine o'clock when the last breakfast dish had been dried and relaid on the table, and Alva became conscious that she had been working with feverish rapidity. In spite of her share in the tragedy, her presence in the dining-room had not brought forth a word of either criticism or sympathy. Even the black-bearded man had failed to do more than recognize her, and then proceed with his silent meal. Evidently Mrs. Baker had been right.

But in spite of the calm that had come over the camp, something still seemed impending, or else it was the ceaseless throbbing of her tortured nerves. Only nine o'clock, yet it seemed as if a whole year's activities had been crowded into the past twelve hours. Alva's head began to ache, and she sank down in a chair near the kitchen door.

After a time she heard a step. Raising her head with an effort, she saw the red-haired woman known as "Tiger Lil" regarding her thoughtfully.

"You look all in," the woman said.

Alva nodded, and tried to smile. Somehow, since last night the gulf between them seemed a fraction less great.

The woman questioned her mutely, then seated herself on the doorstep. She, too, seemed very tired, but Alva read the story of heavy drinking in her constantly twitching movements and bloodshot eyes.

The woman leaned her chin on her hand and stared out over the desert, glittering in the heat.

"I'm thinking about Danny," she said. "It's about time they did something for him."

Alva wondered for a moment, then sat up in her chair.

"Isn't he buried yet?" she asked, in a shocked voice.

"He is *not*," was the answer. "And, what's more, I don't know who's going to do it, either. The Committee is having a meeting, and none of the other men will bother about him, they say. Probably they'll let it go till they get good and ready—then dump him in."

Alva paled.

"He was pretty good to me," went on the woman. "He did lots of odd jobs for me—

just why I don't know. He didn't have many friends while he was here, the poor, old bum, and now it don't look like he had *any*. Nor even—nor even a decent suit of clothes for the grave." She stared moodily out over the heat-hazed plain, and her brows came together in a sullen frown. "He's going to lie there a long time," she said heavily. "It isn't *right*."

Alva's dark eyes grew darker and larger. She stood up. "Let us two go and make him ready for burial," she said.

And so, in a coat room in the rear of the Miners' Hall, where the body had lain all night covered over with a sheet of tar paper, the woman from the East and the woman from Nowhere labored together in that Christian service which woman's compassion has impelled her to perform since the dawn of civilization—and before it.

"Danny never was what you'd call a 'swell dresser,'" the red-haired woman murmured, with a wry face, as she held up a tattered vest. "This would have been good for just about one day more."

A battered notebook tumbled from a pocket to the floor. The woman took it up and scanned its pages curiously. After a time she

raised her eyes, without lifting her head, and looked stealthily across the body at Alva. When she felt sure that her action had not been noticed, she slipped the notebook into her dress and dropped her eyes to the tattered vest again. And their swift drooping hid the light of a great secret discovered.

"I'll see if I can beg some clothes from the saloons," she said presently. "I'll speak to Andy, too, and have him make a coffin, and send word to Randall about digging a grave." Then the knowledge of what the notebook inside her waist contained led her to try a significant remark: "Randall ought to be good at graves by this time. They say he's helped make people *ready* for 'em before."

A sudden flash lighted up Alva's face. The red-haired woman thought it was anger, and turned away before anything could be said, a faint smile curling her already curled lips.

Later in the morning, Andy, the carpenter, grave-faced for once, came and took his measurements and departed again, after expressing himself vividly as to the Committee's laxity, and after a time the red-haired woman returned, bringing a suit of clothes and a clean shirt. During the remainder of their task,

Alva felt more than ever depressed, for the securing of Danny's clothes had been conducted under alcoholic stimulus.

"Funeral's at four o'clock," the woman said thickly when they parted. "They're going to send a couple of miners to dig a grave, but we'll have to get Andy's wagon ourselves, I guess. But we'll bury him good and proper, won't we, sis?"

"We'll do our best," Alva answered wearily; and then, with a cry of despair: "I wonder if there's another place in all the world like this!"

Shortly before the funeral, Mrs. Baker, who had bundled her Mormon friends off on the afternoon stage, came and reproached her.

"You're certainly terribly one-ideaed nowadays, Alva," she said. "You don't seem to look around for anything any more. You just plunge right ahead as if something was chasing you. People don't ever have to do these things *alone*. Why didn't you let me help?"

"I wasn't alone," Alva answered, and the soft light in her eyes showed a saddened understanding and a new toleration. "Tiger Lil was the one who thought of it. I was only her helper, Amelia."

Four o'clock came, and the wagon from the

lumber yard pulled up at the back door of the hall. The red-haired woman looked down from her seat on the box beside the silent Andy.

"They're coming now to load him in, and some are coming to the burying, too. I roasted 'em to a finish down at the Green Front and the Red Onion," she added exultantly. "I guess they know now how we women feel about a decent burial. Has anybody got a Bible, or anything?"

Alva looked hopefully at Mrs. Baker.

"Well, now, I kinda think I *have*," that lady murmured thoughtfully. "I believe I saw something religious sticking around in the office only yesterday. You folks hustle along and I'll run home and look. But don't you go to burying too fast."

With the rough pine box lifted into the wagon, Alva and the red-haired woman walked up the hill together toward the graveyard. Some distance in their rear a dozen men followed in casual fashion through the sagebrush, as if they would finally arrive at the funeral quite by accident.

The other woman looked back several times as they went on, and, when she spoke, Alva seemed to know what would be said.

"Randall will be there, anyhow," the woman remarked, in pleased tones. "He promised he'd come, and that means he *will*. He's coming off shift now—I can see him on the trail. I hope there's singing, don't you?" she added wistfully. "Anyway, just *one* song wouldn't hurt."

As they neared the cemetery, they heard the sound of hammer on steel, and saw two miners at work.

"Better not come much closteter with that young mare of yours, Andy," they called.

"What's the grief?" asked Andy, undisturbed, and set his brake.

"We've struck some of this d——d hardpan about two foot down, that's what's the matter. Danny won't have any more grave than a jack-rabbit if we don't loosen her up with a little black powder. Hang on to your horse, Andy. Bill will be spitting his fuse soon."

As they waited, waist-deep in the brush, the men behind came up and stood in an appreciative semicircle, seizing the opportunity to roll a cigarette and criticise the miners' judgment with gentle humor. Overhead, the sun blazed like the mouth of a furnace. Around them, the fine desert dust rose up in a sage-em-

bittered cloud that seemed both to choke and cut.

One of the miners sat half in the grave, holding a drill on which the other swung down with a practiced hand. Blow after blow came down in machine-like rotation until Alva felt like throwing up her hands and shrieking. A moment to load the shallow hole and light the fuse, and the two men came back, not without caustic remarks as to the hardness of the ground.

Boom! A gentle rain of dirt fell around—Andy's mare danced—the men walked forward and critically inspected the hole—the women followed, and the burial began.

While the coffin was being lowered into the grave, Alva's eyes sought those around her. At the end farthest from her, Randall stood, hat in hand and silent. He looked grim and very tired. If his eyes were on her at any time, she did not notice it, for he seemed to be only staring down at the yellow box. If he were thinking of Danny, she thought, he must be realizing that in his time of peril he had found, as one always finds, the least expected friend.

They looked around at one another—miners, gamblers, vagrants, clerks from the stores, the

three women—and there was a question in their eyes. Then Mrs. Baker came to the front.

“We ought to say something about this poor fellow, I reckon,” she said, in a faintly quavering voice, “and, being it’s Sunday, anyway, I’d like to read this yere Sunday-school leaflet that I located up to the shack. But I dunno. It’s all about the children of Israel adventuring round in a desert like this one here, where it was awful hot and dry and sandy; and because they grumbled some, God sent a lot of serpents to *bite* ’em. Probably that’s meant paregorically, and shouldn’t be took too much in earnest, because we know very well that God wouldn’t do any such mean trick *nowadays*. But it all goes to show that we ain’t the only ones playing in hard luck in deserts, and it don’t do for even a fellow like Danny to grumble. I don’t say we’d get snakes set onto us if we did, but I guess Danny saw quite a few in his time, and if he was here, he’d tell us to be more careful. That’s all. I’d read the leaflet through, only we couldn’t answer the questions on the back, and it ain’t the second Sunday after Epiphany, anyhow.”

When Mrs. Baker had ended, much to her

relief and Alva's, Randall seemed to rouse himself from his brown study. The man's eyes grew strong and clear, and seemed to take in the whole group.

"It isn't up to any of us to preach a sermon," he said, "but I guess most of us believe in God and the square deal, and will agree that it's good for us to come here and do the right thing when a man is passing out.

"As everybody knows, this man Danny was pretty unfortunate. He had a bad appetite and a poor sort of a body to justify any kind of an appetite, and a weak-kneed mind to control both of them. Just to make things worse, he hadn't any friends. Probably a man like that looks to be in a bad way.

"But a man often has friends scattered around that he hasn't been counting on. This man was *my* friend, although I didn't know it at the time. It makes me wish mighty hard that I'd been a better friend to *him*.

"Now, as I said, Danny wasn't what we'd call an awful lot as we figure it, out here, but still there was *something* about him that brought us all out here to say 'good-by,' and that is what is going to do us good. If Danny didn't have any friends yesterday and yet has

all these to-day, we can all be mighty sure that there's a chance for all of us, no matter who we are, or how mean and yellow we've seemed to others. We've always got a Friend."

The red-haired woman's hand tightened convulsively on Alva's.

"He's right! He's right!" she whispered, while her eyes stared out at what Alva hoped was the truth at last. "Everybody's got a chance—if they'll only take it. O-h-h-h! I want to *sing!*"

"*Sing!*" Alva said to Mrs. Baker.


As if she were some kind of a mechanical doll that responded to the touch, Mrs. Baker's lips parted, and the first words of a hymn that all civilization knows came forth in a throaty tremolo. By the time the second line was reached, Alva was singing with her, while a faint accompanying murmur began behind them. But Alva soon found her own voice lowering, while she listened to a clearer, stronger voice beside her.

From Nome to the Needles and from Grass Valley to Cripple Creek there is a voice that rises above the uproar of the saloon both by day and by night—one sound that seems forever ringing out above the ceaseless roll of the

roulette ball and the bellowing at the bar. Though other sounds may come to deaden it—laughter, the gride of boots, the muttered beginnings of a quarrel, a curse, a blow, a fall—yet before the roar of the boom-camp night rolls up again, there always comes the sound of a woman singing, and the wild strain mocks at life and death as well.

But the voice beside Alva took only a note or two before it shook itself free from the twang of the halls and gushed forth in uncontaminated beauty. Higher and higher it soared, like a free-winged bird in flight, until the others grew silent and only one voice was left to sing Danny's funeral hymn. And as the wonderful sounds came forth from the woman's throat, Alva followed her eyes and saw why she had wanted to sing. Once more the verse began, and this time with a strain so poignant that the man's heavy eyelids rose, and she saw that he, also, knew.

Alva felt a sharp pang go through her. In spite of their surroundings her eyes were instantly riveted on the two, searching, questioning, testing. But even her oversuspicious eyes could read nothing in the man's face except a sort of shamed understanding. Then his look



shifted to Alva, and he reddened, for he was seeing her for the first time.

The voice beside her quavered and faltered. Little by little the sweetness died out of its tones. Volume and clearness were there, but that was all. But the woman still sang on, for the blessed knowledge she had gained to-day would be hers always. There would be a chance for every one, some day.

There was a silence, followed by the rattle of earth on the box, and then the group broke up, spreading out in various directions toward the town. The red-haired woman walked among the first, head down and thoughtful. Alva made haste to overtake her, but soon saw that several men were following, and so drew back. For a time it seemed as if something in the red-haired woman's manner held them off. Then she threw back her head with a wild laugh and the men took heart. When Alva raised her eyes again from the ground, Randall was walking beside her.

In all the days since Alva Leigh had first determined to discover Donald Jaffray's murderer, she had never felt so lacking in power of judgment. One after another the events of the past twenty-four hours flashed through her

mind, and yet, when all had passed, she found herself looking silently, helplessly up into his eyes, and wondering if she would ever know the truth.

The man was very grave. Alva knew that he was about to speak to her about himself. The tightened look around his lips told her that a definite understanding was not far off.

"I want to tell you that it was mighty fine of you to look after Danny," he said. "But I've always known that you would do that sort of thing."

"*How* did you know it?" she asked dispassionately.

"Because you're that kind of a woman," he answered simply. "You're a woman with strong likes and hates. You're a woman with a *foundation*. When a thing is right for you to do, you do it, no matter how much it hurts. Of course, you might hurt other people while you were doing it, but because you are that kind of a woman, you'd go just as far the other way to help them as soon as you found that you were wrong. You are a woman whose mind deals in big things *first*, and you'd go through hell fire to do them."

"You are wonderfully clear-sighted," she said, with cold irony. "Suppose we drop the subject."

"Yes. We'll drop it now," he answered. "Because I've something to say to you."

Alva stopped short at the door of her tent and faced him squarely. Was he going to be so utterly foolish as to ask her to marry him?

"We've found the Gun Sight Mine!" he said. *"I'm pulling out in the morning!"*

Alva's face fell. She stepped back, with a gasp.

"In the morning!" she repeated.

"As early as I can. There are some things here that I must clear up first. To-morrow noon I'll be at Furnace Creek. Probably I'll be halfway across the Valley by evening."

He waited a moment longer, for he saw that she was upset—then came close to her and took her hand in his, although he did not raise it from her side.

"Alva," he said gently, "the time has come, now. You're the woman I want. I must go away to-morrow, and it may be weeks or months before I'm back, and so I want you to know that you're the only woman that I've ever

wanted as soon as I saw her—and before that. You're the woman who can have every bit of me from now until I die.

"I've tried hard to keep from telling you, because I wanted to wait until I made my big stake, but I couldn't stand it. And I guess the love I have for you isn't such a puny thing but what it will bear a little talking about.

"We aren't boy and girl, you and I. Folks have said at times that I seemed like I was full grown, but there never has been any doubt about *you*. You are a real woman—a big, strong, lovable woman, without any foolishness, and if you'll let me come into your life, I'll promise not to make it any smaller than I can help. I've known just exactly what you were like ever since—"

"Since when?" she asked, without withdrawing her hand or raising her eyes.

"Since I first saw your face," he answered, with a quiver in his voice. "Do you remember the night when I found you on the desert?"

She moved her head in silent assent, and still did not take her hand away.

"I saw then that my work was cut out for me," he said. "But I was glad of it. For you're enough to make a man work harder than

he ever worked before—and enough to keep him straighter.”

“Yes,” she said, with a colorless intonation.

“Yes, Alva, that is so,” he responded, with a sharp breath, for he saw that his work was still laid out for him. “And I have done it. But I’m not wanting to talk to you about myself. All I want to tell you is what I hope to do with my life for you, and why I’m going to do it.

“I’m wanting to give you everything I can get. I want you to go along in life with me and grow so fast and so fine that no one can touch you. You’ve got it in you to be a big, fine woman. You’re that now—in Magnet—but I’m talking about anywhere in the world that we might ever go. I’d love you, *anyway*, as much as a woman *could* be loved, I reckon, but I’ll be loving you even more, *then*. It isn’t going to take anything more than happiness to make you the finest woman in all outdoors—and if you’ll love me for thinking so, and working all the time to make you more so, that will be all I’ll want.”

He paused for a moment, and then spoke even more gently and humbly than before:

“Have you anything to say to me, Alva?”

Gradually the woman drew away and gathered herself together. There are times in life when the innumerable things that do not matter fall away like a cast-off garment, and only the essentials remain. This was one of those infrequent moments, and the weight of that knowledge lay heavy and forceful in the woman's somber eyes. Most of all, it affected her voice, toning it down to a deep note that told him, with her first words, that his fate would be decided for all time then and there.

Yet there was one thing that gave him hope, even if his case should, seemingly, be lost. She was *too* somber. The moment had become too gravid with fate. There was something wrong—as he had known before.

She took a full breath and faced him.

"Mr. Randall," she said steadily, "you are asking me to do something that is absolutely impossible. I know that you mean all you say, and so I tell you, with the same frankness, that I cannot share your feelings.

"Apart from everything else, my reason is that I can't understand you. Either you are a good man, or a very wicked one. If I were sure which you were, I'd tell you so immediately. Since I've come to Magnet, you've done

a great many kind things for me—things that only a fine, strong, splendid man would do—as you did them. On the other hand, you have, apparently, done other things in your life that even a devil wouldn't do."

"A *devil!*" he murmured, astounded. The look he shot at her was almost one of fright.

"Perhaps there are reasons why I should want to know precisely what you are, and perhaps, after all, it makes no difference. You say you are going away in the morning. This much I will tell you, then: You will not find me here when you return.

"You've come into my life just as I would have the man I might love come into it—fearless, strong, and tender. You go out of my life just as fearless and strong, because that much I see in you; but as far as the rest of you is concerned, you are a mystery.

"I remember that first night on the desert as well as you do. I knew then that you'd either be my friend or someone whom I would never want to see again. If I only knew which one it would finally prove to be—if *proof there is*"—and her eyes suddenly blazed into his—"you may rest assured that I would tell you."

"I know that," he answered calmly, though

a little pale. "That's why I tell you that I love you—because you're that kind. I'm glad you think I've helped you a little. You've helped me a great deal more than that. But I can't follow you when you say that it is I, perhaps, that has hurt you. Furthermore, *I'm not going to ask you what it is you think*. I tell you again that I love you, and you must take me or leave me on what I am. I may have a defense, and I may not—it makes no difference. You'll not know it from *me!*"

Alva never took her eyes off his.

"You take a high ground," she said haughtily. "Also, you presuppose that I love you. You're wrong. I care nothing for you. I care only for one thing."

"And I," he answered. "My self-respect."

Alva's eyes wavered.

"Why are we talking?" she asked wearily. "What can you gain?"

"Your remembrance of what I've said," he answered very gently. "Because these beliefs of yours about me will pass away. When that day comes, I want my love for you to be standing there, waiting. I'll have to stick it out till then, I guess—but it will be worth while.

"I'll be going in the morning before you're up. It may be a long time before I see you again—between where I *have* to go and where you *can* go—but that doesn't worry me much. No matter where you go from here, I'll find you."

"You will not," she stated, as cold as a stone.

"I *will*," came back the answer. "*Because you will help me do it.*"

Alva felt a suffocation rising in her throat. The irresistible forcefulness of his tones beat on her mind, and robbed her of her power to think. She wished, frantically, that he would go away, or cease talking, or that she could stop the endless whirling of her mind, or crush him with some unanswerable retort. But none of these things happened, and she felt her grip on herself swiftly loosening.

Suddenly, in the midst of her weakness, a reviving thought came to her.

"When do you go?" she asked hurriedly, and resolved to bring things to a head that very night. If there were time enough, luck might be with her yet.

His hand strayed toward his watch. He took it from his pocket and held it, unopened,

in his hand, while his lips moved in a silent calculation as to what he must do before the hour of his departure.

"I've got to clean up some business at the Local office, and get my stuff together. That will make it about three in the morning. Packing the burros and all that will take an hour more. Probably I'll pull out about sun-up."

He turned, at a faint breath-catching sound, and saw her grown ghastly white. Her eyes were fixed on the heavy-cased gold watch in his hand, and she was swaying to and fro, her throat choked with unintelligible attempts to speak. Then she fainted dead away in his arms.

It was a moment or two before the man realized what had happened, and for a little while he held her clutched in his arms, frightened by the silent, white face crushed against his breast. To anyone passing at the time, it would have seemed the perfect moment of love's confession.

And, as it happened, someone did see them and misread them in that very way, and stood there in the sagebrush at the corner of the tent with her washed-out blue eyes dark with hate. Then, having seen at last what her growing

despair had told her would surely come to pass, the red-haired woman reeled away with a baleful face to the hell from which she had come.

When Alva came to her senses, she was on her bed in her tent, with Mrs. Baker's anxious face bending over her.

"It's all right now, Alvie, dear," the woman was saying. "Just you lie quiet and pull yourself together. You fainted, that's all," she went on, in response to the query in Alva's eyes. "Dick Randall brought you in here and sent for me. He was the scarest white man I ever saw."

Alva lay still, striving to collect her thoughts. Why had she fainted? She knew she had been frightfully tired and nervous, but that condition alone could never account for such a sudden collapse. As if in corroboration, her gropings encountered the vague bulk of a remembrance which, she felt, must contain the real reason—if she could only make it take form.

As the older woman sat down on the edge of the bed and began to stroke her hand, Alva suddenly turned her face down in the pillow with a moan. She had remembered. The watch she had seen in his hand! The mono-

grammed watch she had given Donald years before!

"What is the matter, dearie?" the other woman cried, appalled. "Tell me your trouble, Alva. You've been carrying this thing that bothers you too long!" She hesitated, then leaned over the face hidden deep in the pillow. "I know he's going far away," she whispered kindly. "Don't be afraid to tell me how you feel. Maybe I can set it right. Men are such *blistering* fools!"

Alva stiffened all through her body. Then, as her disgust served to help her collect herself, she raised her head and sat up, a look of utter finality on her face.

"Amelia," she said carefully, for even that faithful friend must never know her secret, "if you have any idea that there is anything between that man and myself, I ask you to put it out of your mind. When I came to this place, it was not in search of a business in which to make money or even to look for a husband. You've never asked me why I came, and I'm glad you didn't, because I like you too well to tell you an untruth. As things are now, it's possible that I may have to go away from Magnet just as I came—without saying why.

But I want you to remember all your life that there is someone who thanks you from the bottom of her heart for all that you did for her, without asking the questions that you might have asked."

"Why—I never did anything, Alvie," the other wailed. "All I wanted was to see you settle down right with a good man for a husband. And I kinda thought, you know—"

"Please don't, Amelia. It won't help things one bit. I shall never marry anyone."

"But you meant to, once, didn't you?" persisted Mrs. Baker, with gentle objection. "I don't see how you knew about Magnet if you didn't know some man out here. And if the man wrote you letters back East, why, then, you must have been thinking of him that way."

Alva stared. How did Mrs. Baker know that anyone had written letters to her from Magnet?

"You say I've done a lot for you, dearie," the older woman went on, in a voice that trembled on the verge of tears, "but I dunno, after all. Mebbe I've mullixed things up worse than ever I thought. There ain't a whole lot for a woman to do out here, and when *you* came, I hoped you'd let me have a little private excite-

ment, marrying you off to some nice man."

The woman's eyes fell before Alva's puzzled look, and her hand picked at the bedclothes. Her face took on a strange abjectness.

"I shouldn't have did it, I know—but I did want to see you marry Randall, and so a while back I played a mean trick on you. Maybe it was worse than mean—I never stopped to think. But you're so terrible in earnest about everything that I can see now that perhaps—perhaps I made an *awful* mistake."

The woman broke off and began to whimper.

"I did something pretty bad, I guess. I could go right smack into jail for it, Baker says—only—*I've still got the letter!*"

"*What* letter?" cried Alva.

"A letter a man wrote you long ago from here," Mrs. Baker wailed. "Way last winter—a month before you came. It got post-marked, all right, and then it must have slipped down between the end of the flooring and the wall up to the post office, becuz when I went to clean out a family of more than twenty trade rats under the floor last May, I found it there. I should have given it to you then"—she sobbed, while hot tears of remorse rolled down her plump cheeks—"but I figured it was from some

fellow that had gone away, and I didn't want him to find you again. Oh, I can see now that I made a terrible mistake! I see now that I shouldn't have did it, becuz that's what you came here for, all right—and there I went and interfered. As soon as I saw there was no friend of yours here, I thought—I thought it wouldn't make any difference—so long as he'd gone away. And now—and now maybe he's gone for good, and you won't ever see him any more."

Listening to this strange story, Alva felt herself undergoing a great change. Things began to quiet down inside her. She knew who had written the letter, and, since it was still in existence, she had time to pity the other's grief and shame.

"Amelia," she said, while her softened eyes glowed with love for her well-meaning friend, "it's quite true that I'll never again see the man who wrote that letter, but even if you'd given it to me five minutes after it was found, I doubt if it would have made any difference."

"O-h-h-h! Thank Heaven!" sobbed the other. "But you can tell everybody right out what I did, if you want. I'd just as *lieve* go to jail, you know."

"No," answered Alva, while she helped dry the tears. "You were just as honest then as you are now. You were trying to help me, Amelia—so it doesn't matter. Have you the letter?"

Mrs. Baker hunted lachrymosely for her pocket.

"After I give it to you, I'm going right straight home," she said. "It don't seem like I could ever look you in the face again. I keep thinking about that poor fellow that might have needed you all this time. Anyhow, I can say for Randall that *he* didn't know. He'd have made me give it right up."

"I'm not so sure," was the reply that followed Mrs. Baker to the door.

At nine o'clock that night, when everything had been cleared away, Alva locked her doors and sat down to read her letter.

For a long time she held it, unopened, in her lap, studying the postmark and the address. His last letter—written February 1st—nine days before he was shot! What might it not contain? The one previous to this had been written several months before, and had spoken only briefly about his claim and his new hopes. What would she find in this? Would it be like

the dear letters of earlier years, page on page of love and living optimism? Would it show him trembling on the verge of success? Would it bring her the one thing for which, even now, she would give anything she possessed—the command to come and join him? She thought, as she tore the letter open, that life would be almost bright again if she could find merely that one word—"Come!" As she raised the first sheet to read, her trust was diminished in no way by the fact that the letter had been written in an almost undecipherable scrawl.

MY DEAREST GIRL: I wrote you some time ago telling you that I had made a big copper find out here. I hoped then that everything would soon be all right for you to come on. But things have turned against me. I don't know just how I am going to come out.

Alva frowned, and read the paragraph again. It was Donald's letter, but neither the writing nor the tone seemed quite like Donald's. And the words seemed very oddly sprawled across the page.

As I say, I have had hard luck here. I thought that this place would surely see me turning the trick, but it doesn't look that way now. Everything seems against me. I never saw its equal.

I don't know what you will think of this, but if we can't get the money together, I don't know what we are going to do. You may think that this is pretty rough on you, but it really isn't my fault. I had a good claim out here until a man got it away from me—a claim I could have sold for thirty thousand dollars. But this man—I'll get him or he'll get me, some day—did me out of it, and now I'm up against it again.

Perhaps this is the last letter I shall ever write you. Frankly, I don't think there is any good in our writing to each other any longer. We'll just have to—

Alva reached the bottom of the second sheet, and turned it over, trembling, to continue her struggle with the frightful sentences which steadily grew less legible.

There was nothing written on the other side.

For a moment she looked about to assure herself that she had dropped no part of the letter on the floor—then, little by little, came to a realization of the awful truth:

The last page had not been inclosed!

The woman's face grew haggard. It would not have been possible to strike her a harder blow. Careless as Donald had always been, his last neglect became a tragedy.

And yet, as she stared, unseeing, at the blank wall of her tent, the true meaning of the letter came home to her. Her fine, strong, fearless

boy—the boy who would go anywhere, fight anything—had finally lost his grip. In a last agony of contrition, he had been trying to give her up as one of whom he was no longer worthy. He had tried too hard—had worked too long. And at last, when he was tired out and sore and discouraged, a shrewder, stronger man had beaten him.

She turned back to the sentence that had burned itself into her memory—"I'll get him, or he'll get me, some day."

So it was true, after all—what the man Duncan had said. *Everything* was true—all that her woman's instinct had told her, beginning with his lie months ago about the mark on her baggage; true that he had tricked the claim away from Donald—true that he had had him put away—true, all true—as true as the fact that he had even had the hardihood to wear as his own the love token she had given Donald.

Alva laid the letter aside and rose up to walk the floor. Long ago the proofs had accumulated, one after another, and now it was no longer worth while to consider them. All that had ended with Donald's letter. And tomorrow the man would be gone out of her

reach across Death Valley—perhaps forever.

With hands clenched tightly behind her, the woman walked her tent hour after hour. Sometimes she paused by her bedside to kneel down and pray; sometimes she sank into her chair, exhausted by her endless pacing, and sat motionless for half an hour, struggling between despair and that grim force which still drove her mind to studying out some way of arriving at her ends. Midnight came and passed and she still sat or walked about in the darkness. At four in the morning she pushed the flap of her tent to one side and looked out.

Dawn was at hand, for the highest of the western peaks was tipped with fire, but all the valleys were still filled with great pools of mist, and the gray half light made a grotesque world seem still more grotesque and unreal. The camp was quiet, the only sound coming from a pair of mouse-colored burros nearby in the sage. She looked again and knew whose they were, for they were packed and ready for the trail. As they moved vaguely here and there, she caught the faint clink of some metal articles fastened to the *aparejos*—a coffeepot and a pan striking against the top of a burlap-

wound canteen. Presently the burros saw her, and, raising their moist noses from the ground, came up in ghostly single file, seeking food. When a few feet away, the foremost animal stopped, looked hopefully at her, then dropped his nose to the ground and sidled away. The canteen, swung loosely from one corner of the pack, slid forward. The coffeepot and the pan clinked again. As she listened, she heard footsteps retreating up the street, and presently, far off, the sound of a door closing in the Miners' Hall.

And then in that unreal light and in that hideous, unreal place where only wickedness seemed actual fact, her way was made clear to her at last. She would take the law into her own hands!

Quick as a flash, but as silent as a shadow, she slipped into her kitchen and plucked the sharp-pointed can opener from its nail on the wall. Another swift, noiseless rush and she was beside the slow-moving burros. As she had expected, the canteens were full and dripping, for he had submerged them in the tank when he had filled them. She did not trouble to look around to see if anyone were watching, for the same curious impulse was driving her

that had had her in its clutches the night before. Instinctively and entirely without fear, she was about to do the one necessary thing—the only thing left for her to do.

He would need no water until after he had passed Furnace Creek on his way across the valley. He had said, she remembered, that he could make Bennett's Wells on two canteens. Probably he would travel until late that night and camp on the floor of the valley, far from the small stream at Furnace Creek and farther still from Bennett's Wells. If she knew him at all, he would not think of turning back, but would try, somehow, to reach the Wells, *even though the water in his canteens had leaked away*. As to what would ultimately happen down there in the valley, she had no doubt whatever. For once in her life she thanked God that the man was physically brave, for his fearlessness would be his undoing.

Alva felt with the point of the can opener until she knew it had pierced the burlap and was resting against the bottom of the canteen. A sharp blow with the palm of her hand and the steel went through. She waited a moment to feel a tiny stream well out against her fin-

ger, then punctured the other canteen in the same way. If he traveled fast, his animals would be kept ten yards or more ahead of him, far enough for the slow dripping to escape his eye. Drop by drop the precious water would seep through the coverings and evaporate, or fall on the hot ground in pellets of dust, curl up, and be lost. Alva went back to her tent, closed and locked the doors, and sat down to wait for daylight. At the very last moment she had found a way to vengeance—and the outcome was absolutely certain.

And as she sat there, she found that she was no longer restless or sick at heart. So great was her sense of relief that it seemed as if she had had a burning fever for months past, and it had broken all in a moment, or as if a frightful headache had suddenly passed away. Her task was over and done with, and her mind was once more as clear as a bell.

She did not even meditate on the frightful end that was to come to him down there in the yellow sink whose terrors he knew so well, because that was what she had come to Magnet to accomplish. The tortures that he would pass through did not interest her. Others had been tortured, too, and, what was worse, had had

to live. Torture itself was nothing, for its memory would pass out of existence with life. Let him be tortured. Who cared?

The burros nosed about in the brush for half an hour—dawn streaked the east—the light grew stronger. She heard the door up the street close again. She went to her own door, made sure it was fastened securely, came back to her chair, and sat down.

Footsteps came near, and she knew from the snap of the taut ropes that he was trying the pack *reatas* for tightness. Then came the repeated clink of metal as the burros were headed up the basin toward Furnace Creek and prodded into a reluctant trot. Alva softly exhaled the deep breath she had been holding—then caught herself, and sat bolt upright.

He was standing outside her door!

"Alva," he said, in a gentle voice that could reach no ear but hers, "I've come to say 'good-by.' Won't you wish me luck, little woman?"

Alva's heart seemed to stop beating.

He waited a moment for her answer.

"I'll not be back soon," he said, with the old, heart-searching note in his voice that once had so nearly deceived her. "I know you're up

and around, because I heard you. It's a hard job I've tackled—but you know who it's for this time, as well as I. I'm wishing you'd tell a fellow 'good-by.' ”

The woman sat rigid in her chair, her face convulsed. As if there was nothing between them, she could see him standing there without, listening and waiting, the kind eyes pleading with her gently, a strong brown hand raised to hide the sensitive lips that quivered with feeling. She prayed to Heaven for the moment to pass. She had not looked for this. If *only* that pleading voice would cease!

“If you'd open the door,” he said, “I have something that belongs to you. I've kept it too long—but you'd excuse the reason. If you'll not say good-by, then I want it no longer.”

Alva clenched her hands to keep from shrieking. She slipped down from her chair to her knees.

“Dear God,” she whispered, with pallid lips, “God in heaven—take him—oh, *take him away!*”

“Well,” he said at last, “I guess it's over. I'd have done anything in the whole wide

world for you, Alva, but if you can't see me as I am, then it's better that I stop trying to make you see. I've gone as far as I can go. Good-by."

And he was gone.

CHAPTER IX

AT nine o'clock that morning Alva walked into Mrs. Baker's living room at the post office.

"Amelia," she said decisively, "I'm leaving Magnet on this afternoon's stage. Do you want to take the boarding house?"

Mrs. Baker, red-eyed from the night's miseries, groped for a chair, and sat heavily down.

"I *knew* I'd done it!" she wailed. "And now you're going to go and never come back! I'll never forgive myself as long as I live. The *boarding house*! My sakes alive, dearie! Baker and me haven't got money enough this morning to borrow a stewed prune. If it wasn't for the post-office job, we'd be sleeping out in the brush. A new man went on the wheel down to the Green Front last night, and Baker's lost every good, iron dollar we ever had!" With which sorrowful confession, Mrs. Baker covered her head with her apron, and shook with sobs.

The Eastern woman's face lost its somber look, and grew softly radiant.

"But I'm not asking you to buy me out, Amelia," she said gently. "I'm only asking if you want it. I think it will earn you another home in Los Angeles if you're careful. I'm giving it to you, Amelia—free and clear."

An hour later Alva's things were packed and ready for the stage. She would leave as she had come—silently. And as to why she had come or gone, no one in Magnet would ever be the wiser.

She stood in her doorway for a while, as had been her wont, and looked out for a last time on this curious place that had absorbed her life for six long months. But there was none of it that she wished to remember, nor was she conscious of any emotion except an overwhelming desire to make her escape as soon as possible. Presently she put on her hat, and set out through the sagebrush behind the tents toward the cemetery on the hill. To-day she could stand beside her grave without reproach.

But because she suddenly began to feel terribly tired, she did not raise her eyes till she was nearly there. When she did so, she saw the red-haired woman, in a spangled dress and

with nothing on her head, sitting on the ground in the blazing sunlight beside the headboard. Looking a little closer, she saw that the woman was drunk.

"Oh, it's *you*, is it?" the woman said contemptuously. "Go away and let me alone. I'm all right—and no bother."

"I haven't come to interrupt you," Alva answered.

"Then why are you here?" was the query. "But I don't care," the woman went on, and took a drink from a bottle beside her. "I've beaten *you*, Miss Iceberg—and no mistake about *that*. Dick Randall's gone—and he won't ever come back!"

"I know," Alva answered, and began to move away. "He's gone down to the Valley after a mine."

"Ha! Ha!" said the red-haired woman. "Ha-ha-ha! That's pretty good. Yes. That might even be called 'very fair.' Gone down to the valley after a mine, eh? Yes, he's gone to the Valley, all right—the Valley of the Shadow of Death! How's that, Miss Don't-touch-me? How's that for Bible learning? *And he won't ever come back!*"

Alva stopped and looked back, more with

curiosity than fear. Could it be that the other knew what had been done to the canteens?

The look, however, was too searching to suit the other, and she promptly took offense. And as she glared back at the Eastern woman, something seemed to pierce a hidden sac and let the gall-like bitterness of life for such as she flow out and poison eyes and face. Yet convulsed and hideous with anger though her face was, there was a curious glitter of triumph in her eyes.

"I've been watching you for some time," she said venomously. "You thought you were going to get Dick Randall for a husband—but you won't. I saw him kissing you yesterday. Well, you'll never kiss him again. Dick Randall wouldn't as much as look at the likes of me, and I've been a fool to think he would, but I've come up even with the game at last, 'cause I'm even with *you!*"

Alva wondered. So Randall had never associated with the woman, after all! However, it did not matter.

"How are you 'even' with me?" she asked, for the woman's significant tones rang in her ears.

As the woman began to answer, the con-

sciousness of what she was confessing seemed to sober her.

"Dick Randall was the finest man I ever knew," she said, "but he's dead now, and there's an end to him. If it hadn't been for you, he would have been mine. I knew the kind of man he was. He wanted a woman with a heart and a body—and he would have given her all of his in return.

"There was no one here before you came, and I was straightening up. I'd have been a good woman again—the best kind of a woman for a man like him—if you hadn't come along. For—what kind of a woman does a man like him want? He wants a woman that will stick by him day in, day out, forever. He wants a woman that will sleep anywhere, eat anywhere, live anywhere—one that will go along with him in this rough country and help him with her common sense and her bravery—one that will see how he's building himself up every day, and who wants to be part of everything he does. He wants someone he can turn to—someone that will take the trouble to look down into his mind and see what he's trying to do for them both. He wants someone who can look ahead and see the big future that's coming, and

be satisfied in the meantime with one good, decent man. He doesn't want a wife—he wants a *mate*! If a woman's going to stay out her life in this mining country, that's what she's got to be if she wants to be worthy of a man like him. If she don't like the life and can't see what's coming up, then let her get out!

"If you'd have been a regular Easterner, I wouldn't have been afraid of you for a minute. But he thought you were the kind of a woman I've been talking about, and so when he knew you were a good woman, too, it was all over for me. I think he knew somehow that I'd fight for him twenty times where you'd only turn and run, but probably the other side of it was too much against me. Since then I've tried to show him what I'd do for him, but it wasn't any use.

"Life's been hard for me. I guess God didn't figure on my amounting to much all along from the start. But if I can't ever get into *your* class, along of no fault of my own, why, then you can be mighty sure that you'll never get the man *I* wanted. You've said your last love words to Dick Randall, Miss All Right—and

you've kissed your last kiss. Before he went away, I slipped some cyanide into his canteens!"

"Some *what?*" asked Alva, only partly understanding.

"*Cyanide*, you fool," replied the other contemptuously. "If he drinks a drop, he's done. And I guess it's all over now. So *you* won't get him!"

Alva sank down on the ground on the other side of the grave.

"So you really tried to kill him!" she said, in an astonished whisper. "Why—why, what a curious thing to do!"

"Why curious?" the woman retorted angrily. "You were in love with him, and he with you. I couldn't figure out how to get rid of *you*, so I did *him*. And no one will ever know how it was done, until you tell. Then it'll be too late."

"That's true," Alva answered, misunderstanding the last remark. "Probably he won't be found for weeks. But why did you do it? I didn't love him."

The red-haired woman first looked as if she had not heard clearly, then shook her head

in refusal of the idea. But finally her face began to show surprise over Alva's lack of interest.

"Don't talk like that," she said, with a weary gesture. "No plain, ordinary *woman* can fool me. I can see through you like a pane of glass."

"But I say you are *wrong!*" Alva insisted. "I *couldn't* love him. I hated him. He was my worst enemy!"

"Go along, child!" was the tired rejoinder, as the woman took a drink from her bottle. "I don't know why you're saying it, but if it pleases you, why, go right ahead. You can't bother me. Nothing can."

Alva reached across the grave and, with her hand on the other's, held the bottle down on the ground.

"Lillian," she said, with white anger, "if I asked you to believe every word I utter just as if your own mother told you, would you believe me *then?*"

"Sakes alive! Ain't she growing wild?" ejaculated the other. "Well, what *is* it, dearie? Tell mamma all *about* it. Do you think he shot young Jaffray?"

"I *know* it," Alva answered, and wondered how the other had guessed it.

"And what did you do to him for that?" jeered the woman. "Something devilish, I s'pose—like me."

"Yes," said Alva quietly, and looked her square in the eyes. "Just—like—you!"

The woman frowned a little and blinked her bloodshot eyes. She took a long breath, and straightened up as if to collect her faculties.

"It's all right to fool a *little*," she said, "but don't let it go too far. You were in love with that man ever since the day you met, whether you know it or not. He knew it, too, and that's why I stood no show. But *you* couldn't do him any harm. You haven't had the right bringing up for *killing*."

"He murdered Donald Jaffray," Alva answered stonily. "There was no one to punish him for it, and no way to do it. So I did it myself—like you. Does that look as if I loved him?"

The woman's eyes grew stronger and clearer. They glittered with a strange light in which approaching horror was mixed with a near understanding. Her dry, colorless lips

moved soundlessly. Her gaze was riveted on Alva's somber face.

"Why, *woman!*" she whispered, and grew pallid. "You're telling the truth!"

"I am," Alva answered, and it was impossible not to read the honesty in her tones. "*Now* will you believe me?"

The other woman seemed to turn to stone.

"You, too!" she whispered, while her hand clawed at her cheek. "Oh, God! You, too!"

Then something inside her seemed to die. There had never been overmuch of either hope or happiness in her face at any time, and now even those faint lights flickered and went out forever. Her face went from red to the dead gray of ashes. Her eyes were as blank as a wall.

"And *that's* the biggest joke of all!" she said. "The game was against me from the start, but now the last card's out of the box."

She stared unseeingly before her for a moment, then broke into an awful, jeering laugh.

"That's certainly a screamer on us two," she said. "*You* tried to kill him because you thought he'd done up Jaffray, and *I* tried to do it because I thought you were in love with him—and we were both wrong. Two *fool*

women!" she ground out, between her teeth. "May God in His mercy have pity on our souls!"

Alva didn't understand.

"He shot him," she repeated somberly, and pointed at the grave between. "There he lies."

The red-haired woman gave her a startled look that seemed to question her sanity.

"Yes. There he *lies*," she answered, with fathomless contempt. "*And he's still lying to you*—just like he lied when he was alive!"

Seeing that she wasn't understood, she suddenly grew furiously angry. With a sweep of her hand, she struck Alva a stinging blow on the cheek.

"*Wake up*, woman!" she cried, with white-hot wrath. "Wake up and let me tell you something about this man—this wonderful man of yours that you tried to kill Dick Randall for—though you don't say how you did it." Springing up like an aroused tigress, she jerked Alva to her feet with a powerful clutch of her hand.

"Look down there at that grave!" she screamed. "Look down in there, and see if you see the fine, Christian gentleman that you thought you had. O-h-h-h! I know all about

you, and why you came to Magnet, and if you hadn't fooled me and fooled Dick Randall, I'd have put you right long ago.

"Look down!" she cried, and pointed a quivering finger at the grave. "There lies a man who was *no good!* Don Jaffray was his name. And when I tell you that he was no good, remember that it's *me* that's telling you—*me*, who knows more about men in ten seconds than you'd know in ten years—*me*, who's been with 'em from Alaska to Arizona—drank with 'em, ate with 'em, lived with 'em, wasted my life for 'em. And I tell you that this fellow was the poorest, weakest, lowest specimen of a man that ever walked this desert. He never amounted to anything—he never *could*. All he had was a smile and a way with women. Do anything for *him?* Try to get justice for *him?* Commit murder for *him?* Why—he was worse than Danny the Bum ever thought of being, for while he was writing his precious love letters to *you*, he was spending all his money on *me!*"

"Lies! Lies!" came the frantic cry, as, with face convulsed, Alva tried to strike the other down. "You don't know what you're saying. You have no proof!"

"Is it proof you want?" the woman cried, springing back out of reach. "Then here it is. There's part of a letter down in my tent right now that he wrote you last winter while he was in my own room. *Now* will you believe me?"

"Oh, I guess you will," she went on, with a contemptuous glance at the blanched cheeks. "That's always the way with you soft women. You haven't got sense enough to pick a good man to kill for. I suppose, like as not, he told you that he'd got done out of his claim. He used to tell me that, too—till I shut him up. Don Jaffray lost his claim because he was too drunk to get out and do his holding work. When time was up, it was Randall who did the work, and then went and gave him some money, which he didn't have to do. Oh, yes, he was a fine one! If I'd ever been in love with Donald Jaffray, I'd want to go away and hide my head. Why, I even got him to sell his watch so as to give me money. Perhaps Randall bought that, too."

Alva stood amid the ruins of her world, and saw the earth opening beneath her feet. The red-haired woman might have picked a hundred different sins and called them Donald's, and had only scorn for her pains, but the fact

remained that she had made the one statement that Alva knew was unquestionably true. She had proved the one unforgivable thing that made all the others possible.

"He shot him!" Alva whispered, not because that was what she thought, but because her mind had stopped working and her lips were merely repeating what they had been long formed to say. "He shot him," she said again, and then was done.

"He *never* shot him!" the red-haired woman screamed like a fury in her ear. "*He shot himself!* Danny the Bum saw him do it!"

She thrust her hand into her waist, and pulled out a battered notebook. "See that, you fool! That's Danny's precious book that I found on his body yesterday. He was the only man in Magnet who knew how Jaffray died." Fumbling it frantically, she spread out a torn page under Alva's staring eyes. "Look at it and read it yourself."

And Alva read:

Last nite I see a yung feller shoot himself out in the brush back of the Red Onion abt $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. He done it with an old stile Frontier Colt 44 with 2 nics in the but. I could only get \$1 for-it

After a long pause Alva lifted her eyes slowly from the page.

"Then—he—didn't—kill—him—after all!" she said, with a frightful effort. "I—have—been—wrong—from—the—start!"

The red-haired woman laughed and tossed the book away.

"That's what," she said. "That bet goes for both of us. We were wrong from the start." Her vitality seemed to wane, and she sank down, dull-eyed, on the ground. "How could I ever have figured to get right!"

Still on her feet, though her senses reeled, the woman from the East clutched at her throat in a strangled effort to speak. "We've *killed* him!" she shrieked, as the truth came home. "We've killed that good man—and there was no reason!"

"There *was*, but there *ain't*," the other answered, in a dead voice. "And the difference between seeing things as they *are* and as they *ain't* is what makes lives right or wrong. I didn't know that *anybody* could be as crazy as I am, but I guess you're *it*. Now, go along and leave me. Because *I am done!*" And she turned her back and began to fumble with a

knot in her handkerchief where she had kept something concealed. But before she uncovered it, she raised the bottle once more.

"Here's to Dick Randall," she said. "A last drink to the whitest man in heaven. If he isn't there yet, he mighty soon will be."

And then the light that had been withheld from Alva Leigh for so many months came back into her mind. Struck dumb with horror, she realized that her morbid brooding had blunted her sense of right and wrong, had stolen away her womanliness long before she had ever come to Magnet. And she saw now what the desert madness had wrought for she had misread every good motive, interpreted every honest act with suspicious, jaundiced eyes.

Although she would never have understood if his own surroundings had not also been hers she could see the reasons for Donald's failure and all the progressions of his fall. The evidence had been given and no futile wish of hers could change it. It lay in every self-excusing line he had written for four years—in what he had not written—and, above all, in what he had written, but had never sent. Lack of will-power, loneliness, bad companions and drink

had changed the boy from an irresponsible rover into a broken, moral-less wreck,—and remorse had done the rest. The desert had beaten him.

With this lightning stroke of revelation the image of Donald Jaffray which, for all these years had been her most precious possession, passed out of Alva Leigh's mind forever. Another rose up in its place—one that was nobler and more manlike in its indomitable strength. She saw the western desert man, of the undaunted boyhood and masterful years, as he came to her rescue on the first night. Again—she saw him as day by day he did her secret kindnesses. And she saw him as, for the last time, he spoke his saddened good-by outside her door. She knew now that somewhere among those steadfast months her first true conception of life had been born through him and with it had come a friendship which had been her only salvation—and the offer of something far more wonderful than friendship. As her new image became transfigured by these thoughts the light of faith and love which shone in his kind eyes was more than she could bear.

To add to her agony, the reasons for every-

thing he had done were now so crystal clear. She saw that he had done her a friendly act, even before she had set out for Magnet, for it had been he who had sent her the marked newspaper months ago. It was plain that he had known who she was, and why she had come to Magnet from the very first, and a great wave of shame swept over her when she thought of the insults whose prompting suspicion he must have understood so well.

And yet the short moment in which all these things were made clear did not permit her to review each scene and action by itself. Instead, she seemed to see all of them simultaneously, like some great composite picture in which she constantly recognized new proofs of that blessed gift which she had so blindly refused—a picture so true that it finally led her on to her own actions and the inexorable end.

For a little while she tried to reject the idea that she had deliberately planned to kill another human being. Now that everything was clear, it was unbelievable that crime and the Alva Leigh whose purposes she knew so well could ever have joined hands. She thought of her family traditions, her religious beliefs, her carefully guarded girlhood, of every protect-

ing, sane-minded influence that had surrounded her life since the day of her birth, and criminality, for Alva Leigh, became an impossible thing. She thought of Natalie—of Sally—of Nannie Ferguson waiting faithfully at home—of her old girl friends—of all the beautiful things that memory's world held—of the far more beautiful world to which someone had lately given her the key—and she was ready to cast the idea out of mind for a hideous nightmare. And then she remembered Mrs. Baker's astonishment at the change that the desert had wrought, and was filled with awful fright. Could it possibly be that she, Alva Leigh, had become a wicked woman?

A dreadful vision filled her eyes. She seemed to see her family, her friends, herself in the person of her earlier life, on the other side of a great gap whose abyss was infinite in depth. Upon the nearer brink stood the Alva Leigh of to-day, blackened forever with the same pitch that defiled the lost soul beside her.

She stood still, agonized, while yellow hills and sky and blazing sun rocked up and down. The world grew dark, and she heard no sounds. Sanity trembled in the balance. Then her body revolted under the strain,—her heart began

to beat once more. The blood flowed through her veins with an agonizing tingling. Sight and hearing returned apace. She came in touch with life again.

And with her returning senses, the words that the other woman had last spoken came back to her, fresh and vivid. Her eyes opened wildly—she gasped from a dry throat, then flung up her hands to heaven with a cry.

"*Not dead,*" she shrieked. "*Not dead yet! God help me to reach him!*" And with never a backward glance she whirled away and went running down the hill.

It was only a little after ten o'clock. Even if he had traveled fast, he would now be only halfway to Furnace Creek. Could she hope to overtake him? It did not occur to her that a drink from his canteen would be governed more by thirst than by the time of day—all she could think of was a great gray basin between ragged mountains and the figure of a man plodding along behind two burros through a sea of sage. Then she realized with awful dismay that she could never hope to reach him if she went on foot. She must go in a wagon or else find a horse. And so she did not stop at her tent longer than to snatch the dripping canvas

water-bag from its nail outside the door. Then she rushed on behind the tents toward the lumber yard below the town, for it often happened at this time of day that the horse on which Andy made his excursions to the outlying shafts stood, saddled and bridled, in a corral in one corner of the yard.

As she hurried through the brush, the sight of the idlers in the streets filled her with agony. She wanted to cry out to them—to stop their foolish joking and shock them into action. The thought that there was no time to speak the word that would change that lazy scene into an uproar—that she alone must carry the terrible knowledge in her mind until the end set her in a frenzy. Then she turned the last tent and gasped with relief, for the horse was standing in the corral, ready saddled and bridled, and nosing over the fence to see who was coming.

A few steps more and she had pulled the gate bars out and was untying the halter. Throwing the loop of the water bag over the pommel, she tried to lead the animal close to the fence so that she could mount. When he failed to understand her excited tugging, she struck him frantically with her clenched fist, and sobbed

aloud over her impotence. But he soon threw up his head with a jerk and sidled nearer the fence, and, without stopping to try the cinch, she stepped up on the boards, and got into the saddle.

All told, it was a bare three minutes after the red-haired woman's last words had been spoken before Alva was galloping furiously down the long slope of the basin toward Death Valley.

And as she rode she was unmindful either of the loose girth beneath her or of the hell of heat overhead, for a new anguish had been added to her burden.

She loved him.

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Up on the hot hillside the red-haired woman in her spangled dress sat picking laboriously at the knot in her handkerchief. She succeeded in opening it after a time, and took out a lump of something that stuck to her fingers as she handled it. Breathing heavily, she raised it to her tongue for a tentative taste. Then she sighed once or twice, and swallowed it. The lump had seemed small and white, like a cube of sugar. But it was not sugar, and after a

moment the woman shuddered and lay down beside the grave.

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"The difference between seeing things as they are and as they ain't."

For the hundredth time Alva's straining eyes picked out a distant figure in the sage only to drop it again in despair, and think of the red-haired woman's bitter sally. The faint black shape had been only the trunk of a Joshua palm, lurching from side to side in the heat waves that eddied liquidly in the air, grotesque and hideous with its outflung arms, and yet not a whit more grotesque than the images that she had thought so real for all those months.

Her face grew haggard. Miles back she had lost her hat, and her head was frightfully hot. She had never before ridden a horse for a tenth of the distance she had already covered in the hour past, and the stirrups were too long and the leathers too short. She could only grip as best she might with her sore, weakened knees, and hold to the pommel with both hands.

A half hour later she felt herself swaying in the saddle, and, taking up the water bag, she

poured a little of its contents on the crown of her head. Then, instead of drinking, she hung the bag where it had been before, and fixed her hands in a deathlike clutch on the pommel, resolved to ride that way until she fainted dead away. As to how far she had come, she could not even guess, but she felt that her furious riding must be bringing her very near, and every moment she searched the view ahead more closely than before. Up and down over the swales she rode, pausing occasionally on a crest to peer ahead, and then plunge down the other side, urging her tired animal on with voice and heel. Once, as she trotted down a slope, she found the saddle sliding down on the horse's neck, but as she knew only vaguely what the trouble was, she did not think of dismounting and tightening the cinch. She had begun to repeat some words to herself.

"You must not drink!" Over and over again she said it—monotonously, untiringly—singing it and shouting it—striving to throw it out ahead of her, so that if there were such a thing as telepathy, the thought wave might reach his mind. *"You must not drink!"* she cried frantically. *"You must live! Live! Do you hear me?"*

Her horse stumbled, with one foot in a gopher hole, and she caught him up savagely. He broke into a run, and, suddenly, she saw the saddle turning under her. Too startled to know what to do, she felt herself falling off to one side, and in another moment was lying unconscious on the stone-crustured ground while the horse dashed on. When she finally came to her senses and realized what had happened, the animal was nowhere to be seen.

The woman gazed around her at the panorama of bone-dry desert and flaming hills, and threw up her hands to heaven with an inarticulate cry for help. Her head was muddled and her face was covered with dirt where she had rolled in the dust. Her dress was torn, and a bright rivulet of blood flowed down from her cheek from a cut on her forehead. But none of these things mattered now, and, with her eyes wild with anguish over her terrible predicament, she strove to collect her scattered senses so that she could decide which way to go. Finally, she put the sun behind her where it had been before, and stumbled away through the brush. She would go north, as she had been going before she fell—and he must not drink—*he must not drink!*

Her foot tripped over something, and she saw the water bag where it had fallen when the saddle turned. The stopper was still in its neck, and she stooped with incredible effort and picked it up.

"Richard!" she called. "Here is water for you! Water—water, Richard. *But you must not drink!*"

A mile farther and now the sun was like a furnace mouth! Around her the Joshuas lurched and stuck out their gnarled arms at her. She found herself lost in a great clump of them. One caught her dress and seemed to try to draw her nearer. She struck out at it, terrified, and reeled away.

"Richard! Richard!" she cried. "They're trying to take the water away from me! But you must not drink it, even if I bring it to you. I'm a murderess, Richard, and I'm bringing you poisoned water. Wait—oh-h-h, *wait!*"

At the foot of a high swale she found she could go no farther, and sank down on her side in the hard yellow sand of the wash. She could not see very well now, and the clamor in her ears was that of a thousand boilers being riveted all at once.

"I wanted you to wait," she sobbed. "You

said I'd help you find me some day. I laughed at you then—and I tried to kill you, too—but it's all happening just as you said. I said I didn't love you—but I *lied*. Richard—Richard!" she whispered humbly. "Will you ask me *again*?"

The clangor was abating in her ears now. It was not, however, because there were no more boilers to rivet, but because the engine that furnished the power was running down. A few more revolutions and the noise would cease. Alva thought it would be a great relief.

And so the first time she heard the new sound she did not recognize it. It was a thin sound, and very faint and it seemed to come from a long way off—the clink of a coffeepot and a pan against the top of a burlap-wound canteen. But when it came a second time, she struggled to her knees and put her hand to her ear. Another clink and the sound seemed closer. She staggered to her feet—her eyes opened wide with hope—she stumbled down the arroyo with arms outstretched.

A mouse-colored burro came into view around the end of the swale. It walked a few steps farther, stopped, sidled off to one side,

and looked around. A few feet behind stood another burro and beside it a man, unfastening something from its pack.

With her last remaining strength she ran forward, cried out her warning and fell prone in his arms. The canteen dropped on the ground and rolled away.

Her eyes opened slowly.

At first she could not tell where she was, for everything was blurred, but she soon found that she was lying in the cool shade of a ledge with part of his pack for a pillow. Something cold was on her forehead, and, as her eyes cleared, she saw him wetting a second handkerchief with water from the canvas bag. Her heart leaped. The warning cry rose to her lips. Then, almost as quickly, she began to relax. Little by little the frightful tension eased and in another moment she dropped back on the rough bed with every anguish dissolved forever in a flood of heavenly peace. The thing she had done to harm him had proved the single cause of his salvation. The poisoned water had leaked away.

When she looked up again, he was bending over her, his face worried and strained.

For a long time she was silent. As she looked up into his face her eyes were only deep pools of tears. Helpless under the weight of her sin, she might not try to discover either what he suspected or what he knew. Perhaps the good-by that she had never said might as well be spoken now,—she could not tell. She only knew that if mortal happiness were ever to be hers, it must come from him whom she had tried to injure. Yet her eyes were brave and steadfast, for behind them lay the strength of will to atone, if need were, with life itself. And so her look came straight and pure from her pure soul—asked bravely for all she had thrown away—and won it.

She put up her hand and drew his face down to her own.

“You said I’d help you find me, Richard,” she whispered, “and here I am. I’ve been wrong from the start, but, please God, I’m right now! Will you forgive me—and kiss me, Richard?”

Some hours later the burros were headed home. He walked beside her as she rode, and now the long miles of the daytime were all too short.

"You'll lose the Gun Sight, Richard," she said remorsefully. "You forgave me too soon."

"I have won more than any mine," he answered soberly. "But we'll not lose it. The claims have been recorded. We'll be there—both of us—in the Fall"

Her hand sought his and rested in it. Her lips tried to form the old, old vow:

"'Whither thou goest, I will go. Thy people shall be my people—'"

Her voice broke over the solemn words. She was only a girl, after all, and she had suddenly begun to feel terribly alone. It was a strange life on which she was entering—a strange, strange ending to all her plans.

And then his arm went round her, and all her troubles passed away. Wherever they might go—whatever might happen—she knew that she would never be alone again, nor would the new life with him seem strange. She was coming to woman's full estate; already its boundless reaches were in sight, and their glory dimmed the dreadful valley that she, as well as he, had barely escaped.

And so, held in the circle of his arm, she rode up the last swale and saw Magnet. The

lights were out and the moon was shining. The tents were as beautiful as driven snow. It was Magnet, and yet it was not the mad-house of wickedness and distorted images that she had left that day, for she was seeing it now with the clear eyes of the man beside her, and in the light of an abiding peace. It was where love had found her, in spite of herself, and where love would cleanse all.

She drew him close and knew he understood her thought.

"I have been a sick woman, Richard."

"The desert has cured you, then," he answered. "For us two, it has been a friend."

He pondered for a moment, then felt in his pocket for his watch. He opened it and held it out in the moonlight so that she might see the inside of the case.

She saw her own face.

"I've waited a long time for you, Alva," he said simply. "I knew you from the very first. But even before that, I knew that you would be the woman I would want."

She could not trust herself to speak. Her eyes could only envelop him with their soft love light. She slipped the picture from its hiding place, and dropped the watch underfoot.

He nodded understandingly, and smiled, then put the tiny photograph away in his coat.

"You knew me? Then you know what I've thought—and done?" she asked directly, for less than the whole truth now would not suffice.

For answer, he gathered her close in his arms, the light of a great wonder in his face.

"I know—and have forgotten," he said. "You are *too* brave! If I asked you to tell me, you'd do it if it killed you—and that would kill me, too." He paused and then, with an instant's wonderful illumination, let her see abiding sanctuary for her tortured soul. "*We have not come up out of our valley to look back!*"

And with those words, the door to the past closed forever—and Alva Leigh came back to happiness and Magnet.

THE END

